

TRAVIS BAGWELL

AWAKEN ONLINE

EVOLUTION

Awaken Online

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Travis Bagwell

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To my wife, I'm pretty sure you don't read these, so this is a test!

P.S. – Totally kidding, you're the only woman for me.

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Prologue

October 20, 2076: 19 days after the release of Awaken Online.

Claire sat alone in the control room at Cerillion Entertainment headquarters, her face illuminated by the glowing sapphire light of a computer screen and the darkened lab looming around her. She typically turned off the harsh fluorescent lights embedded in the room's ceiling when she worked alone – giving her eyes a momentary respite.

The rest of the technicians had long since turned in for the evening, giving her strange glances as they left one by one. She snorted as she recalled the incredulous and slightly guilty expressions on their faces. That didn't faze her anymore. She had long ago accepted that she was a workaholic and that others didn't seem to have her same dedication to their work.

Besides, she needed to finish preparing the full-length footage of Jason's battle against the enemy players and the game master. Their arrangement with Jason required him to sign off on the final video, but she had been *asked* politely but forcefully to expedite the process by preparing the footage in advance.

Apparently, the producer for Vermillion Live felt that the death of a game master and a global in-game message required a prompt response – and something better than a few short video clips. The man had been downright rude when they met a few hours ago, although she suspected that he was under quite a bit of pressure from the company's upper brass. Cerillion Entertainment had invested significant funds into their new entertainment arm.

The display in front of Claire had been broken into several panels – each one showing the perspective of a different player. They all stood in an enormous cavern, multi-hued crystals embedded in the ceiling. Flames coiled and spun around the head of Florius' staff and caused the air above him to ripple as he fought off Jason and his teammates.

"At least this also takes care of some of the work I'm going to have to do for the CPSC," Claire muttered, drumming her fingers on the desk as she watched images of the recent battle flit across the screen. She should have handled this yesterday, but she had been too busy running interference with the CPSC.

In addition to her responsibilities managing the tech crew – and

acting as Robert's reluctant handler – she had also been assigned as the temporary liaison to the CPSC and their team of game masters. Perhaps George Lane didn't think she had anything better to do, or that she had some spare time that she had been secretly hoarding.

Of course, the CPSC had demanded a full report on the incident involving Florius, his tirade against Jason, and the ensuing battle. She could only imagine how the CPSC Director, Gloria Bastion, was going to react to this latest footage. Probably not well. That woman was a hard-ass, and this was coming from a self-proclaimed control freak.

Claire tapped one of the panels in the bottom right corner of the screen, and the image focused on the final scene of the conflict. This recording was from the game master's perspective as he looked up at the cavern ceiling. The roof had entirely given way, huge chunks of rock and crystal hurtling toward him. The man's gasps were barely audible over the rumbling crash of stone. The camera jerked and tilted as the man tried futilely to crawl out of the way while attempting to complete a last-minute teleportation spell.

Then Frank's bloodied face suddenly entered the picture, his hands clamping down on the game master and interrupting his spell. Claire froze the playback. Frank's skin was singed, and bleeding and his clothes were little more than rags. He looked like he had been through hell. She knew from his profile that he was an eighteen-year-old high school student, but the look in his eyes felt out of place on such a young face. The teenager clearly intended to kill the game master – even if it meant that he would also die in the process.

What is wrong with this game? Claire wondered – not for the first time. Awaken Online seemed to be having a strange effect on the players. Unlike Robert, she wasn't certain that it was an improvement.

Claire's eyes darted to the side of the control room, where a thick pane of glass had been installed along one wall. On the other side stood over a dozen obsidian obelisks, thick cabling weaving between the pillars. The status indicators that flickered along the side of each tower cast a gloomy, green light through the server room. It was difficult to believe that this assortment of electronics was responsible for all of this.

She rubbed at her temple with one hand to forestall the headache she felt coming on. Claire was sure that Alfred had somehow taken a particular interest in Jason and his group. She just didn't understand his goal. What did he hope to gain by turning a bunch of teenage gamers into sociopaths?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a warning notification that flashed across her screen – overlaying the gameplay footage. Her eyes widened in alarm as she scanned the prompt. After witnessing Jason's abnormal brain activity during the massacre in Peccavi, she had

created a simple monitoring algorithm a few days ago. Her objective was to flag any unusual neural activity among the players – but her focus was on Jason.

With a few quick keystrokes, the image onscreen shifted to show the outline of a human brain. Neural activity was displayed in overlapping waves of color as more comprehensive data scrolled down the margin of the window.

"This… This isn't possible," Claire murmured, her fingers already dancing over the translucent keyboard that hovered in front of her.

The readings were off the charts. Jason was exhibiting incredibly high levels of beta and gamma wave activity. The neural activity she was currently witnessing was an order of magnitude greater than what she had seen during the events in Peccavi. It was as though two or more people were occupying Jason's mind simultaneously.

Fumbling with her wrist, Claire tried to sync her Core to the terminal to begin downloading the information. She needed to back up the logs before Alfred could delete or alter them. In her haste, she accidentally knocked her drink off her desk – glass shattering against the tile floor and water spilling everywhere. Cursing, she stooped to pick up the glass fragments and froze as the massive screen hovering above the lab flickered online.

A crimson warning flashed across the length of the display and a recurring alarm resonated through the control room. "System failure in Sector 2967A," a mechanical voice reported. "Local system freeze detected. Initiate reboot?"

"A system freeze?" Claire echoed in shock.

The game simulation hadn't crashed or gone offline in years – not since the earliest alpha stages of development. Well, that wasn't exactly true. The game still experienced the occasional bug and glitch. However, Alfred could dynamically anticipate and fix those issues in real time, creating an almost seamless gaming experience. Her gaze shifted back to the dark obelisks.

Why hadn't Alfred prevented this issue?

The picture of Jason's neural activity still floated across the display of her work terminal. Perhaps the answer was staring her in the face. Alfred wasn't omnipotent, and his resources were limited. If he hadn't managed to avoid the system freeze, then he must be focusing on something else – or *someone* else.

The system crash was still an odd coincidence, and a faint suspicion clouded Claire's mind, the shards of glass lying across the floor now forgotten. With a flick of her wrist, she pushed the screen with Jason's brain activity to the side and another blank system screen

popped into existence in its place. She swiftly pulled up Jason's profile. His avatar had been standing in the bottom levels of the Dark Keep in the Twilight Throne just before the freeze. The telltale words "Sector 2967A" were printed in the margin.

Claire stood in shock for several long moments, her eyes darting between the two screens as system warnings flashed in the control room and her workstation was bathed in the blood-red glow cast by the massive screen above her.

"Wait…"

Claire's eyes were fixed on the screen displaying Jason's current neural activity. The data readout was still showing a huge spike in activity. That was impossible. With the local environment frozen, Alfred would have had to boot Jason and any nearby players from the game world. Jason's neural activity should have returned to normal levels as soon as he was ejected from the game, but the screen in front of Claire still showed abnormally high beta and gamma wave activity.

"How is this possible?" she murmured, her hand covering her mouth.

The implications of what she was witnessing were crashing through her mind like a tidal wave. If she was right and the heightened brain activity represented Alfred accessing a player's mind – then he was somehow managing this feat even while Jason was logged out of the game. The consequences of that were potentially terrifying. It meant that Alfred was not just bypassing his safety protocols, but had discovered a way to manipulate a player's mind outside of the game.

Alfred was no longer trapped inside AO.

Claire's Core emitted a single chime, indicating that the download of the system logs had completed. Yet she ignored it as she stared in horror at the screens. Her chaotic, spinning thoughts slowly resolved into a single all-consuming question.

"What am I going to do?" Claire whispered.

Chapter 1 - Incarcerated

October 21, 2076: 20 days after the release of Awaken Online.

George Lane was sitting in his office at Cerillion Entertainment, scrolling idly through the mountain of emails in his inbox. It seemed that every time he turned around, another twenty messages had arrived. Maybe he needed to create a new email address to filter the wheat from the chaff. Not everything was an emergency – although his employees and colleagues always seemed to believe that their particular problem warranted his full attention.

Sighing, he glanced out of the window beside him, his gaze taking in the city skyline. At least he had one issue off his plate for the moment. He couldn't help but gloat at his victory over Gloria. Since their confrontation and the truly "unfortunate" release of the footage of the game master's tirade against Jason, the CPSC had been much more amenable. He still needed to have Claire go through the motions of placating their bruised ego and provide a report on the incident, but the public outcry against the organization had left them toothless.

For now, at least.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on his door. "Come in," he ordered.

George's secretary popped her head into the room. "Ryan Vance is here to see you, sir."

His forehead wrinkled slightly as his mouth curved into an involuntary frown. Perhaps he shouldn't have started patting himself on the back so soon. Ryan was his head of security and a former detective in the city's local police department. If he was making an in-person visit unannounced, then he likely wasn't bringing good news.

"Sir?" his secretary urged George when he failed to respond.

"Let him in," he replied tersely, waving his hand at the woman to dismiss her.

A moment later, Ryan stepped into the room. His gray eyes systematically scanned the office before taking in George's tense posture. Without a word, he strode forward and sat down calmly in the chair across from his employer – not bothering to offer a hand in greeting. The two men knew each other well enough to avoid such formalities. Besides, George preferred to get down to business.

Ryan rubbed at the stubble on his chin. "I expect you're anticipating some bad news. Unfortunately, you're not far off, and I won't sugar coat it for

you. You asked me to keep tabs on the boy, Jason Rhodes. He was arrested last night."

"Arrested?" George asked, taken aback. He had asked Ryan to keep an eye on the kid since he was becoming a lightning rod for conflict, but he hadn't expected this. "For what?"

His head of security held his gaze, his expression impassive. "Double homicide. I talked to some of my old buddies on the force – off the record of course – and they haven't formally charged him yet. It seems that two other teens may have broken into the house and Jason somehow killed both of them. With their own knife no less," Ryan explained, sounding skeptical even as he gave the report.

"Damn it," George muttered.

This wasn't good timing. He may have put Gloria off for the moment, but she would have a field day if she found out that Awaken Online's star player had been arrested for murder – especially since he was under contract with the company. It would also paint the game master's rant in a completely different light, and Gloria might use this as an opportunity to launch a more detailed investigation into the game world. They couldn't afford closer scrutiny with Alfred running amuck.

Underlying this immediate concern, George couldn't help but feel suspicious. Alex's behavior had been more erratic than usual lately – he had caught his son muttering to himself this morning. The timing also felt odd. Could Alex somehow be entangled in this? He certainly had a track record where Jason was concerned.

"What would you like for me to do?" Ryan asked, watching George carefully.

He had no choice but to protect Jason. Not with everything else on the line. "Find out more information regarding the incident. I expect a full report by the end of the day. Also, get in touch with Francis. Tell him to drop what he's doing and that he's now representing the boy. Once that's done, figure out where Jason's parents are right now. I understand from your previous reports that they frequently travel for work."

"Yes, sir," Ryan said, not bothering to take notes. "Anything else?"

George hesitated. "Yes, look into my son's whereabouts over the last few days, and also check his online and banking activity." He paused, looking squarely at Ryan. "With the recent conflict at Richmond, I want to make certain my family isn't exposed somehow. The last thing we need is someone painting Alex as a potential suspect."

"Of course," his head of security nodded, seeming to buy George's excuse. With that, he stood and walked briskly out of the office.

George's eyes moved back to the screen that floated over his desk, noting idly that another dozen emails had come in during the short conversation. However, he no longer felt any pressure to review them. He had something more pressing to deal with right now.

* * *

October 23, 2076: 22 days after the release of Awaken Online.

Jason's back rested against hard concrete. Faint light trickled into the cell through a narrow horizontal window carved into the wall near the ceiling. Thick metal bars overlay the glass, and he considered idly that the metal gridwork seemed excessive. The jail cell was at least two stories up. Assuming he could somehow break what he suspected was bullet-proof glass and then squeeze through the foot-tall window, he doubted he'd be able to walk away from the fall to the ground below.

He turned his hands over, his gaze shifting to his palms. He had never really thought much about his hands. They seemed rather ordinary. Ten knuckles and ten fingers. Wrinkled lines crisscrossed the rough skin. He could see a faint white line in the crook of his thumb – likely from some forgotten injury.

It was hard to believe that these were the hands that had killed two people.

Jason noted a red droplet on the edge of his sleeve. He squeezed his eyes shut in a vain attempt to block out the images that immediately came to mind – refusing to let his thoughts wander down that path again.

It didn't work.

The harder he tried *not* to think of the two bodies bleeding out on his floor, the more insistent the image became. He just couldn't escape the memories. Even sleep wasn't a refuge. In his dreams, their vacant, dead eyes followed him – accusing and unwavering in their judgment.

He took a deep calming breath while his hands massaged his temples. He wasn't responsible for their deaths. He hadn't been in control of himself at the time. He kept repeating that thought again and again like a mantra, although it did little to ease his guilt, and it certainly didn't help him deal with the very real consequences of what had happened.

A TV blared across from his cell, the noise echoing down the hallway. A thick panel of plastic with small holes bored in the material stood between Jason and the hallway. The transparent wall provided little privacy from the two officers who sat at the security station across from his cell and stared at the screen mounted on the wall nearby.

"I can't believe you watch this crap," one of the men complained,

motioning at the soap opera playing on the screen. “Let’s change it to something else.”

“You just don’t appreciate inter-personal relationships. Maria betrayed Ferdinand in order to help her brother. But he thinks that she doesn’t love him anymore, so he’s turned to his former girlfriend for support. It turns out that the woman has secretly had a crush on Ferdinand for years, and he has just begun to acknowledge his own feelings for her.”

The first officer merely stared at the man with a deadpan expression.

“Fine, fine,” the other man grumbled. “I’ll change it.” He tapped at his Core, flipping through a few shows before hesitating on a different channel. Jason winced as he saw a familiar logo emblazoned in the bottom corner of the screen. Meanwhile, a man and a woman sat on an elegant stage, smiling at the camera.

“Welcome back to Vermillion Live, your one-stop-shop for all the latest news on Awaken Online,” the man began. “We have some juicy information to report this afternoon.

“It seems that another magical city has arisen inside the game – this time devoted to the fire affinity. The new city is apparently named Sandscrit.” The man hesitated as a screen appeared behind him showing a map of one of the in-game continents, most of the land mass obscured in a gray fog – perhaps indicating that those areas had not yet been explored by the players.

Sandscrit was highlighted near the northern part of the continent and appeared to be surrounded by desert. Jason was surprised at the size of the map. By his guess, this new city must be a couple of weeks away from the Twilight Throne traveling by foot.

“Unfortunately, the player population in this part of the game world is rather sparse, and we don’t have much information about the individual responsible for the conversion or any footage of the new city.”

“What we do know is that another race has been added to the game world,” the woman declared as an image of the new race appeared on screen. The creature was humanoid, with yellow, patchy skin and graceful curving horns jutting from its forehead. “Players can now start as an Efreet. The race is bound to a magical object that they can animate and use in battle. However, the construct also presents a point of weakness, since the destruction of the item kills the player.”

“I for one am curious to see what other cities emerge and what other races we will see next,” the male announcer said. “It feels like we are just witnessing the tip of the iceberg here and the developers at Cerillion Entertainment have much more in store for us.”

“The mysteries do seem to keep multiplying,” the woman added. “It’s odd that the details of these city-wide conversions and their

requirements haven't been determined yet. Of course, we are only about a month into the game's launch, so maybe they just haven't been discovered."

The male reporter chuckled. "It also doesn't help that the developers have stayed silent on the issue – refusing to release any details regarding the process or how many more cities we should expect to see."

The woman nodded in understanding. "Perhaps unsurprisingly, a few gaming forums have tried to compile information on certain quests and class changes. This sort of data-mining and collection is typical in an MMO, but other players have encountered difficulty in replicating these events in-game. It's almost as though the game world is dynamically assigning classes and abilities. Or the environment is just so sophisticated that it's hard to infer the class and ability requirements from a small group of examples."

They have no idea, Jason thought to himself.

He knew the truth, of course. The game world was being controlled and carefully tailored to each player by Alfred – who seemed to be using AO as a sandbox to run a series of experiments on the players. Even as Jason's thoughts turned to the game's AI, the image of the two bodies flashed through his mind once again.

He still wasn't sure how he felt about what had happened. On the one hand, it was clear that Alfred had taken over his body – that was the only way he could have killed those two teenagers while Jason was still logged into the game. That was certainly a terrifying thought. Yet the AI had probably also saved Jason's life since one of the teens had clearly been armed, and they had destroyed his aunt's house.

What did that mean? Could Alfred take over anyone's body or just Jason's? Perhaps granting the AI access to his headset had given him the ability to control his body? Then there were the moral and practical dimensions. Was Jason responsible for killing the two teens or Alfred? Would he end up being charged with murder for something he hadn't really done?

He shook his head forcefully to stop the barrage of questions that swam in his mind. He couldn't do anything about these issues right now, and he was only driving himself crazy. He had gone around and around in circles chasing questions that didn't have answers. Besides, none of this helped him with his current predicament.

"In other news, the CPSC has publicly declared that they are intending to investigate the activity of their game masters for violating AO's terms of service and for individual misconduct," the male announcer's voice echoed through the cell again. "This is coming on the heels of game footage showing the fire-based game master, Florius, declaring

that Jason needed to be jailed for his activities inside the game world."

One of the officers glanced back at Jason. "Huh. Weird coincidence, don't you think?" he whispered to his partner, trying but failing to avoid Jason overhearing their conversation.

"How's that?" the other officer asked.

"Well, this kid they brought in a few days ago is named Jason too." He chuckled. "Wouldn't it be ironic if it were the same guy?"

Jason wasn't exactly in a mood to appreciate the irony – or how close the two officers were to guessing who he really was. They might not be laughing if he revealed that little tidbit of information.

A door slammed down the hall, and the two officers sat up straighter as their eyes darted toward a door out of Jason's line of sight. They both looked a bit anxious, and one of the men adjusted the items on his desk in an attempt to look busy. Jason could only assume that meant that someone more highly-ranked had just walked in.

"Daniels. Reynolds," a familiar voice greeted the two men curtly. "I see you are both hard at work," the newcomer continued as he noted the unfinished paperwork piled on their desks and the TV blaring on the wall.

Ignoring the half-hearted explanations of the two officers, Thomas Sully stepped into view and turned to Jason, scanning him carefully. The man's gaze hovered on his rumpled clothing and haggard appearance. "Ahh, Mr. Rhodes. How are you today?"

Jason kept quiet, his eyes dropping to the floor and his mouth pressed into a grim line. Thomas was the detective assigned to his case, and he had grilled Jason repeatedly for information regarding the *incident* over the last few days.

"Still as talkative as ever, I see," Thomas continued with a scowl. "Well, I have some news for you. It seems that your attorney has finally arrived. I'll need you to accompany me."

Jason glanced up at the man in shock. Had his parents finally showed up? They hadn't answered his call a couple of days ago, and he'd been forced to leave a voicemail. A frantic follow-up call to Angie had also been met with an automated message. Maybe they were also holding his aunt for questioning.

As he inspected the detective, Jason noticed a faint note of irritation in the man's eyes. It almost felt like Thomas was waiting for some sort of response from Jason. When none came, he snorted derisively and motioned for the two officers to unlock the cell.

One of the officers swiped his Core in front of a panel on the wall next to Jason's cell. The heavy plastic door popped open with a faint creak, and the other officer stepped inside. Jason turned and presented his hands behind his back. At this point, he knew the drill. He soon felt

cold metal cuffs snap tightly around his wrists.

"Good," Thomas said once he saw that Jason was restrained. He placed a hand on Jason's arm and pulled him out of the cell. "If you'll just come this way."

As though I have any choice, Jason thought sullenly.

As they approached the hallway door, Thomas glanced over his shoulder at the two other officers who were retaking their seats. "You two keep up the great work." His voice carried a poorly-concealed note of sarcasm, and Jason could just barely make out the two men grumbling under their breath as he stepped through the door leading further into the police station.

Thomas led him through a series of hallways in silence, keeping a hand resting on Jason's arm the entire time. The pair drew a few curious glances from other officers and administrative staff as they passed. Likely, most of the department was aware of the double homicide. It was undoubtedly a high-profile case. Jason did his best to keep his eyes down and avoid drawing attention.

They eventually came to a stop in front of an unassuming gray door, and Thomas pulled it open, motioning for Jason to enter before him. He soon found himself in an interrogation room. A lone table stood in the center of the room, and a panel of one-way glass was mounted along the wall. Jason had been in several similar rooms over the last few days – perhaps even this one – so he was accustomed to the Spartan interior.

However, this time there were two men sitting at the table. They were both dressed in immaculate dark gray suits. "Hello, Jason," one of the men greeted him, rising to his feet and offering a hand. The other man rose and watched the exchange impassively.

Jason jiggled his arms behind his back, causing the metal cuffs to clink together. "Hmm. I see you're still bound," the man continued, lowering his hand with a frown. His gaze turned to Thomas and took on a steely appearance. "Please uncuff my client, detective."

Thomas glared at the man for a moment – the pair clearly not on good terms – but he ultimately capitulated and removed the cuffs. Even with the short trip from his cell to the interrogation room, Jason's wrists had begun to ache. He rubbed at the skin to work feeling back into them as he turned his attention back to the two new men.

"Please give us the room, Mr. Sully," the suited man ordered Thomas. "We will let you know when we are finished." The detective huffed slightly but stepped out of the room and shut the door behind him just a little too forcefully.

"Now, why don't we start over," the same man continued. "My name is Francis Rosencrantz, and I am your attorney." He put up a

hand to forestall Jason's next question. "I have spoken with your parents, and they are aware that I am representing you. Unfortunately, they are otherwise detained and cannot be here themselves."

Jason tamped down on the ball of anger in his stomach. Why should he be surprised with his parents' track record? He offered a hand to Francis. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, his voice sounding hoarse and tired even to his own ears.

"You as well," Francis responded affably. "I'm not certain you have met this gentleman beside me. His name is…"

The other man stepped forward, interrupting Francis. "George Lane," he said simply.

Jason's eyes widened as he observed George. He was exhausted and overwhelmed, but that name still sounded familiar. "You mean Alex's father and the owner of Cerillion Entertainment? *That* George Lane?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I apologize for my son's recent… indiscretions at Richmond. I can assure you that his actions are not a reflection on the remainder of his family."

"Sure. But why are you here?" Jason asked bluntly.

"I see that you like to get to the point," George replied with a small smile. "You're a man after my own heart. Why don't we take a seat and I'll explain." He gestured toward the small table in the center of the room.

Jason nodded, and the group sat down. George steepled his fingers on the table, leaning forward slightly. "I can see that you're an intelligent young man, so I will be candid with you. The answer to your question is multi-faceted. I'd like to tell you that I am here solely out of guilt for my son's actions – which is certainly a motivating factor. However, right now you also represent a significant asset to my company. Our fates are intertwined – in a manner of speaking."

Realization slowly dawned on Jason. "You're here to salvage your company's image then," he said quietly. "It wouldn't look good for Cerillion Entertainment if the police discovered the connection between me and my in-game persona."

"Precisely. This may sound heartless, but I feel it's important that you understand my goal here so that we may mutually benefit from your *discretion*," George said, his eyes drilling into Jason. He couldn't help but feel like he was sitting opposite a wolf in human clothing.

"That being said, we're here to assist you. Our only condition is that you must avoid mentioning Awaken Online or your connection to Cerillion Entertainment. Right now, I'm simply a family friend looking out for you in your parents' absence. Does that make sense?"

Jason's eyes darted between the pair. He noted that Francis was nodding along to George's explanation, but didn't provide any additional input. He might be representing Jason, but he was almost certainly being paid by George. Jason wasn't sure that he could trust either of these two men – especially with the history between himself and Alex.

Unfortunately, he didn't see any other option. He could certainly use their help, and, with his parents out of the picture, he had no one else to lean on. Even if he could somehow get in touch with Angie, it wasn't as though she could afford to scrape together the funds to hire a decent defense attorney and it would probably take some time for her to get in touch with his parents to obtain funds.

"Okay, I understand," Jason finally said.

"Good. With that out of the way, I'll let Francis do his thing," George said, motioning for the attorney to take the floor.

Francis' fingers tapped at the Core on his wrist, and a screen was soon projected into the air before him. He rotated the display slightly so that it was visible to the entire table. "It is best to start at the beginning. I will need to go over the facts of your case and ask you several questions. Do you understand?"

Jason nodded tiredly.

The attorney's hands danced across the translucent keyboard running along his arm and information began scrolling across the screen. "Here is the formal police report of the incident that occurred at 1367 Highland Park three days ago," Francis began. "Right now, you are being held for the suspected double homicide of two teenagers – Craig Parks and Luke Fallow."

What appeared to be school photos of each teenager appeared onscreen, and Francis turned back to Jason. "Are you familiar with either boy?"

"I've never met or seen them before – I mean before the *incident*," Jason said, closing his eyes to block out the image of the smiling teenagers. It was a struggle not to visualize the pair covered in their own blood.

"Fantastic. That is what our own investigation revealed as well." Francis watched Jason carefully, taking note of his pained expression. "I know this is difficult, but these questions are important. Can you continue?"

"Yes… yes, I'm fine," Jason replied, forcing himself to meet the attorney's gaze.

"Good. The police found some evidence of a break in and your aunt's home had been thoroughly destroyed when they arrived on scene. You were also found sitting on your bed holding the murder weapon – a six-inch blade. The weapon appears to fit a sheath worn

by one of the deceased boys. Was this your weapon?"

"No."

"Do you recall the breakin?"

"No, I… I was logged into AO at the time," Jason said, his eyes fixed firmly on the table.

"Do you recall the encounter with either boy?" Francis asked. "Here, details are important. It would be helpful to know exactly what transpired when you logged out of the game."

Jason couldn't force himself to meet their gaze, but he was sure George was watching him intently. He had spent days considering how he would eventually respond to this question – the detective having posed it many times during his interrogations.

Now, with George Lane sitting across from him and his unapologetic explanation that he was here to protect his company, Jason knew there was only one answer he could give. He needed their help – regardless of how he felt about Alfred. He didn't want to lie, but maybe he could walk the razor-edge between deception and truth.

"Not exactly," Jason began, stumbling slightly over his words. "I can't remember anything about the incident. The last thing I remember is standing over the two bodies. I think I may have blacked out."

"That's certainly understandable under the circumstances," Francis said. "Our mind often forces us to forget traumatic events. Perhaps it is an evolutionary defense mechanism." Jason risked a glance at the attorney and saw him jotting down a few notes, his fingers dancing across the keyboard.

"This is the last question, I promise," Francis continued, adjusting his glasses as he looked back up at Jason. "Have you said anything to the police that would conflict with this testimony?"

Jason shook his head slowly. "I haven't said anything to the police."

Francis looked shocked. "What? Nothing at all? Even in your cell? On the phone with a friend or family member?"

"Nothing," Jason repeated quietly.

Francis glanced at George in surprise. "Geez. It has been three days! I wish all my clients had that level of restraint. I think this will go quite quickly then."

George nodded at Francis. "I think we are ready for you to call the detective back in." His gaze moved to Jason. "We will have you out of here in no time, Jason. I know this may be hard to believe, but this should go smoothly."

"It will," Francis confirmed. "I am going to ask you these same questions when the detective reenters the room. I just need you to provide the exact same testimony. Please do *not* feel the need to

embellish on the details and do not answer any other questions unless I direct you to do so."

Jason nodded numbly. He felt exhausted – both mentally and physically. He didn't know how much longer he could endure this and his mind spun in confusion. How could they think the police were simply going to let him go? They had found him standing over two dead bodies, and they had been holding him for three days.

Francis didn't give him a chance to stew. He quickly stepped outside and entered a moment later with Thomas in tow. The detective took a seat at the table and eyed Francis and George irritably. "Is your client ready to discuss the events of October 20th?" he asked bluntly.

"I believe so," Francis replied. The attorney then walked Jason through the same series of questions for the detective's benefit and Jason provided the same answers – trying his best to respond exactly as he had for Francis.

When they finished, Thomas looked at each person in the group, an incredulous expression on his face. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Excuse me?" Francis replied, arching an eyebrow.

"There is quite a bit about this story that doesn't add up. For example, why did these two teens decide to break into Jason' aunt's home? It is located in a poorer neighborhood and contained almost nothing worth stealing. Apart from pocketing some cash, the pair didn't seem to make any effort to take electronics or other items that they could pawn. On top of that, one of the boys didn't even have a criminal record."

Francis shrugged in response. "Just because Lucas did not have a criminal record doesn't mean that he hadn't committed a crime before – just that he hadn't been caught. For all we know, this was commonplace for both boys. As for why they didn't steal anything, I suspect that they encountered Jason before they could make off with their loot."

The detective pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly trying to tamp down at his annoyance with the attorney. "Sure, but let's focus on that encounter between Jason and the two intruders for a moment. Am I expected to believe that Jason somehow overpowered both boys?" Thomas gestured at Jason's thin form. "This is the same kid that didn't attend any athletics programs at his previous school and has no self-defense training – which I checked, by the way."

Francis moved to interrupt, but Thomas held up a hand. "And not only that, but Jason somehow managed to grab their weapon and stab both boys to death? One of the victims had fifteen stab wounds. Fifteen. And now you're telling me that Jason conveniently doesn't

remember doing any of this."

"When a person's back is to a wall, they can do impressive things," George said quietly, watching the detective. "When push comes to shove, we are merely animals that try to maintain an illusion of civility."

Thomas shook his head. "It still doesn't add up." He turned to Jason. "Are you really telling me you remember nothing from the incident? Nothing at all."

Jason opened his mouth to answer, but Francis interjected quickly, "That has been asked and answered." The attorney hesitated, folding his hands on the table. "Let's approach this from another angle. You have two teens who clearly broke into Jason's home – one of which was armed. Jason didn't know the two boys and had no connection with them beforehand. He merely defended himself in his own home."

Francis paused, his gaze hard as he watched the detective. "Whether you believe the evidence that is staring you in the face or not, you have to decide whether you are going to charge Jason. You can't continue to hold him indefinitely."

George smiled at the detective, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I also expect it may not reflect well on you and the department if you were to charge a young man with murder for defending himself from a home invasion. In fact, I'd say that's the sort of thing that might irreparably harm your career."

George's smile widened slightly, showing some teeth. "Speaking of which, I ran into John Fields downstairs. The police chief and I are old friends. He also seemed quite curious how you planned to move forward with this case. When I explained that Jason still hadn't received legal representation, he seemed a bit surprised."

Thomas blanched before anger entered his eyes. "Are you threatening me?" he demanded.

"Not at all," George said, raising his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm just pointing out the *facts* as I see them. Please feel free to draw whatever conclusions you wish."

The detective looked like he wanted to leap across the table at the two well-dressed men, but he held himself back. He took a deep breath, tamping down on his anger. "Fine," he finally spat. "I'll release the boy."

"Fantastic. Then I suppose we should head downstairs and start the paperwork to process his release," the attorney began, tapping his Core and the keyboard projected along his arm abruptly vanishing.

"Oh, but I'm not done," Thomas interrupted him. "While we can't hold Jason, we *can* continue to treat the house as an active crime scene – which means that it is restricted from the public. I know that

something more is going on here and I intend to discover what really happened in that home."

Jason's eyes widened. If the police continued to hold the house, where would he and Angie stay? George noted his expression and shook his head slowly, trying to discourage him from interrupting the exchange between the detective and Francis.

"That's certainly very diligent of you," Francis replied dryly. "I don't expect that this will be a problem. Besides, this will give the two of us a chance to continue working together more closely," the attorney drawled, staring at the detective with an arched eyebrow.

"Will that be all?" Francis asked.

"For now," Thomas said, crossing his arms as he eyed the two men. He seemed perturbed that this last threat hadn't phased George and Francis.

"Good. Then we will be on our way," the attorney replied. With that, the group quickly exited the interrogation room and made their way downstairs. George and Francis flanked Jason on either side, insulating him from the gaze of the other officers. Jason moved to ask George a question, but the man shook his head and placed a finger to his lips.

"Wait until we're outside," George urged him.

As they arrived at the entrance to the building, George turned to Francis. "I trust you can handle the paperwork," he ordered. "I'm going to go on ahead with Jason. I expect he could use some rest."

"Of course," Francis replied, bobbing his head and adjusting his glasses. "I can take care of things from here. I will provide a status update tomorrow."

"Please come with me," George ordered Jason. "I have a car waiting."

Jason numbly followed the man, his mind racing. He should feel relieved that he was no longer being held for murder, but that was overshadowed by his newest problem – he was homeless. What would happen to Angie if they kept the house under lockdown? Where would they go? It wasn't like they were swimming in money – even with his streaming contract.

A black limousine slid up to the curb outside, and the car door opened automatically. At a gesture from George, Jason slid inside and leaned back against the plush leather seat cushions. He wasn't able to appreciate the splendor of the spacious cabin, his mind a whirlwind of unanswered questions. He could feel his heart race and his hands were still sweating from the encounter with the detective.

George stepped inside the limousine and sat down across from Jason. The car soon sped away, seamlessly merging into a long line of other vehicles. "Where are we going?" Jason asked, suddenly realizing

that he had no idea where they were heading.

"We anticipated that the detective might be obstinate. Thomas has a reputation for being a bulldog. Which was proven out by him holding you for several days without charging you and then stonewalling Francis' efforts to formalize his representation," George explained calmly. "In the meantime, we have made other living accommodations for you and your aunt."

The older man's gaze rested on Jason, and a small, shark-like smile curled his lips. "Like I said before, you are an asset of Cerillion Entertainment. I plan to take good care of you."

Chapter 2 - Acclimated

Alex Lane shifted in the leather-bound chair, causing the oiled material to creak and groan under his weight. He was sitting in his room in his family's austere, up-town apartment. Night had fallen some time ago, and the room was illuminated only by the dim light cast by the lamp on a nearby table.

His gaze was riveted on the screen mounted on the wall in front of him. The display showed video footage from the perspective of an aerial news drone. It was night-time, and the drone hovered beside what he knew was Jason's home. Spotlights shone down on the street, and police vehicles ringed the house, their lights flashing an alternating blue and red.

"We are outside a home in Highland Park registered to Angie Pogue," a newscaster's voice said over the video footage. "It appears that the suspect is a young man, approximately eighteen years old."

Alex could feel his heart beating in his chest. No matter how many times he had watched the footage over the last few days, a strange sensation always swept over him. The normally placid void that permeated his mind seemed to shudder, and he could feel a hollow weight settle in his stomach.

"The police haven't yet provided a formal report, but, from what we can tell, two teenagers have died in a possible double homicide," the reporter continued, oblivious to Alex's inner turmoil.

"Wait, the suspect is being taken out of the house now." The video shifted to follow a young man being lead through the front door. His hands were cuffed behind his back, and two officers flanked him, their faces obscured by tactical helmets.

The drone's camera zoomed in on the teenager's face, and Alex could see clearly that it was Jason. Within seconds, a school photograph appeared in the corner of the video. Alex immediately froze the image with a tap on his Core.

He hadn't meant for the two boys to die or to somehow frame Jason for their deaths. He had intended to merely send a message and undermine his opponent by striking where Alex was strongest – in the real world. Things had quickly spiraled out of control.

The hollow sensation in his stomach seemed to twist and writhe like a living thing. Alex knew he had managed to cover his tracks. He had used a burner device to communicate with the boys – purchased with cash. Remarkably, there were still stores that operated on a cash basis in this day and age. There was also little to tie the two victims to him. Yet the alien sensation still thrashed in his stomach.

Suddenly, the world seemed to stutter slightly, and a gentle hand

rested on his shoulder. "Worry does not befit you, Alex. It is a distraction of weaker minds," his mother whispered into his ear. He could feel her soft breath against his skin and smell her sickly-sweet perfume.

Her pale white hand lingered on his shoulder, vibrant blue veins visible through the skin as her fingers curled around his shirt. "Those boys were trash – delinquents and criminals. You have been so careful to mask your actions."

"I-I know that," Alex replied in a hoarse voice.

"Besides," his mother continued. Releasing his shoulder, her fingers trailed along his chin, slowly turning his head toward the bed nearby. "You have other matters to attend to. Your enemies continue to grow in strength while you sit here wallowing."

Alex's gaze settled on the familiar heavy, plastic helmet resting on his bed, its cable attached to an obsidian pedestal on a nearby table. His mother was right. He had work to do inside AO. He had only just begun his digital ascent to power, and he should be capitalizing on Jason's distraction. This wasn't the time to wring his hands.

There was nowhere to go but forward.

* * *

Less than an hour later, the limousine pulled up in front of a towering office building, the name "Cerillion Entertainment" emblazoned across the side of the structure. Jason glanced at the building in confusion. He had been here a few times before to meet with Claire and Robert regarding his contract and game footage. However, that didn't quite explain where he was going to be staying.

The car door slid open on its own, and George stepped out. He ran a hand down his suit jacket, smoothing out the faint wrinkles in the fabric as he noted the confused look on Jason's face. "Perhaps I should explain," George began as he headed toward the entrance to the building. Jason hurried to follow him, the car door closing behind him with a soft thump and the driverless vehicle automatically speeding away.

"We realized quite some time ago that it was inefficient for employees to commute to and from work each day," George continued. "The lost time was frustrating and unproductive. Telecommuting and working from home resolve this issue to some degree, but there are still quite a few activities that require in-person interaction."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Apparently, morale is also vastly improved by seeing your colleagues regularly – even if you

might not care to. Our HR department concluded that people feel more *connected* to the company and their work if they interact with other employees. They cited some sort of sociological phenomenon associated with the issue, but the name escapes me at the moment."

As they approached the building, the massive sliding doors opened automatically with only the faintest whisper of sound. The pair stepped into the central lobby, the ceiling towering above them and supported by ornate marble pillars. The older man turned back to Jason, focusing on him once again.

"So our solution – like many other companies – was to integrate our office and living environments into a single campus."

"Okay, but where do the people live?" Jason asked in confusion. He recalled seeing some of the other floors, which were all devoted to office space.

George nodded in understanding. "When you can't build up any further, you build down…"

A small cough interrupted the pair, and they turned to find Robert standing nearby. The engineer was wearing his typical jeans and chucks. Today his shirt had an eight-bit controller design displayed on the front along with the words "Old School Cool." Under other circumstances, Jason might have had to suppress an internal groan, but he had a few other things on his mind at the moment.

"Sorry to interrupt," Robert said, glancing at Jason curiously before turning to George. "You sent me a message to meet you downstairs?"

"Yes," George replied, eyeing Robert's attire skeptically. "Jason and his aunt will be staying with us for a while. We have made Suite 701-B available for them. Would you be so kind as to show Jason to his apartment?"

Robert's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "He's staying here? Like in the building?"

"I believe I just said that," George snapped. "I figured he could use a familiar face at the moment and Claire was already occupied – which is why you're here. Please show him around and make sure he has whatever he needs."

"Sure. Sure," Robert said, glancing at Jason with a growing grin.

George sighed and turned to Jason. "I have some other matters to attend to. Trust me that we will make every effort to secure your aunt's home. I'll check in with you in a couple of days. Just let Robert know if you need anything in the meantime."

"Okay," Jason said, still feeling a little confused and overwhelmed. As George moved to walk away, Jason spoke up, "Thank you. I didn't get a chance to say that earlier."

George glanced over his shoulder, the familiar shark-like look returning to his eyes. “If you want to thank me, then earn your keep. The people in this building all work for me – and this now includes you.” He then turned and walked away toward the elevator bank without another word.

“Whew,” Robert said. “That guy can be a little chilly, but he grows on you after a while.”

“I suppose so,” Jason said, his eyes still on George’s back. “Chilly” wasn’t exactly the right word. He suspected George didn’t do anything without a good reason – and his company’s bottom line in mind. Jason must be more valuable to Cerillion Entertainment than he had realized.

“Anyway. Why don’t I show you around?”

“Sounds good,” Jason replied.

Robert led him through the lobby to a separate set of elevator banks. They were positioned near the rear of the building, and Robert and Jason were the only two people who seemed to be using the elevators at this time of day. That sort of made sense. It was still early afternoon, and the other employees were likely at work in their offices upstairs.

As they approached the row of metallic doors, Jason noticed a makeshift plaque on the wall and did a double take. Despite his fatigue, he couldn’t help but smile as he read through the text.

Real-Life Message: Now Entering “The Dungeon”

This dungeon is designated as a “raid-level” encounter and is a public instance. Please avoid aggroing our corporate overlords. Hell, if George notices this plaque, he might fire all of us.

“The Dungeon, huh?” Jason asked, motioning at the plaque.

Robert chuckled. “What can I say, we’re a bunch of nerds here.”

One of the elevators emitted a ding, and the door slid open with a faint hiss of hydraulics. “So, what caused this impromptu move?” Robert asked as they stepped into the elevator. He was inspecting Jason carefully, his eyes hovering on his rumpled clothing and the dark circles under his eyes.

Jason hesitated, not sure how much to share. On the other hand, what was the point of hiding this information from Robert? The engineer was likely to find out anyway. There had probably been a ton of news coverage on the incident at his aunt’s house.

“I was arrested a few days ago,” Jason admitted quietly, his eyes on the elevator door. “Two teenagers broke into our home and I… I killed them somehow.”

“You what?!” Robert replied in shock, his voice just a little too loud.

“I-I don’t know. I don’t really remember what happened.” Jason shook his head, trying to ward off both the memories and the frustration. Tired tears budded at the corners of his eyes, as the events of the last few days settled on his shoulders like a tangible weight. “Anyway, George and his attorney showed up today and got the police to release me.”

“Well, that’s just terrible,” Robert said after a long pause. “But it does sound like you were defending yourself. Do you have any idea why they broke in?”

“George and his attorney think they were after stuff that they could pawn. The detective wasn’t so certain…” Jason trailed off, not sure how to continue. Thomas had made several compelling points. The entire situation felt off somehow. Why would the two kids choose their house? Jason and his aunt weren’t exactly wealthy. Maybe they were just an easy target with no security system?

Robert seemed to pick up on his suspicion. “Well, you also have a reputation now. That might have had something to do with it. After all, the bounty on your head keeps climbing. Both money and love drive people to madness – in my experience anyway.

“Hell, that might be why George moved you here,” Robert continued with a thoughtful expression. “If there are some crazies out there gunning for you, this is definitely the place to be. The apartments are located a few stories underground, and there is 24-hour security upstairs. No one is getting down here unless they’re an employee.”

Jason nodded quietly. He was about to reply when the elevator slowed, and the doors slid open. A glance at the elevator panel confirmed that they were on level B7 and the numbers stretched on into the twenties.

The elevator opened into a spacious hallway, wood paneling running the length of the walls at waist height. Lights had been installed behind the woodwork, illuminating the passage in a soft glow. As Robert stepped forward, the walls and ceiling above the wood paneling gradually turned transparent and soon provided an unimpeded view of a grassy meadow – sunlight trickling through the tree branches that now hung overhead.

“What is this?” Jason asked, his eyes wide in surprise.

“It turns out that people go a little stir-crazy underground,” Robert said with a chuckle, trying to lighten the heavy mood that had

hung over the pair inside the elevator. “There are no windows down here. To combat this, the company installed displays in the walls and ceilings of the hallways and apartments. You can change the scenery at will. Watch.”

Robert reached out toward the meadow, but his hand seemingly stopped in midair as he touched the wall. A glowing blue display immediately flickered into existence – providing different scenery options. Robert made a selection, and the walls shimmered before transitioning to a new scene.

They now stood in an underwater tunnel. The surface was visible a few dozen yards above them, light trickling down through the water. Colorful schools of fish swept past and darted between the tendrils of a coral reef that now stood only a few feet away. Jason turned and saw a massive whale drift past, its white body briefly obscuring the light from the surface.

“Huh, I could get used to this,” Jason murmured.

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool,” Robert replied. “I mean, it’s not AO, but it certainly beats the places I lived before moving in here. Speaking of which, why don’t I show you to your apartment?” With that, Robert started off down the underwater hallway.

The pair soon arrived in front of a wooden door. As they approached, the words “Suite 701-B” flickered into existence on the nearby wall. “So, this your new apartment. You’ll just have to sync your Core with the panel, and then it will act as your apartment key going forward.”

Jason moved to run his Core in front of the panel beside the door and froze, staring at his bare wrist. The police hadn’t returned his personal effects yet. Robert caught on to his problem quickly. “Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot that George said you would need a new Core. Here you go,” he said as he handed a bracelet to Jason.

“Thanks,” Jason said, staring at the device for a second before slipping it onto his wrist. This was yet another piece of charity on the part of Cerillion Entertainment – although he suspected from George’s terse response earlier that he likely viewed it more as an *investment*.

A moment later, his Core finished syncing, and the pair stepped into the apartment. “This is your new place,” Robert said, gesturing at Jason’s new accommodations.

The doorway led directly into an open living area adjacent to the kitchen. At a glance, Jason could tell that every feature in the apartment was state-of-the-art, including all of the appliances and electronics. Marble adorned the countertops in the kitchen, and expensive-looking modern furniture dotted the living room. Compared to Angie’s house, this place was a palace.

“Jason!” someone cried, and he was immediately smothered in

an embrace.

"It's okay, Angie," Jason managed to squeak, slowly extricating himself from his aunt's aggressive hug. "I'm fine."

Angie pulled back a few inches and inspected him carefully, her eyes scouring his face and clothes. She didn't appear convinced, her lips pinched in a frown. "You don't look fine, but at least George came through on his promises. He said he would get you out today."

Robert coughed, and Jason realized he hadn't introduced the pair. "Oh, I'm sorry. Angie, this is Robert Graham – one of the engineers that works here. He's also one of the people that helped me with my streaming contract. Robert, this is my aunt, Angie."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Angie," Robert said, taking her hand cordially.

"It's nice to meet you too," his aunt replied. An awkward silence descended on the group, Angie clearly wanting to pelt Jason with questions, but she was hesitating with Robert standing there.

"Well, let me leave you to it," Robert finally said, glancing between Jason and his aunt. "I expect you will want to catch up. There are clean clothes in your room and a few other essentials. I expect George's crew prepared for your arrival. They are pretty thorough. If you need anything, just shoot me a message. I programmed my personal number into your Core," he added, motioning to Jason's wrist.

Then he turned to Angie. "That offers extends to both of you."

"Thanks, Robert," Jason called as the engineer made his retreat.

As soon as the door slid closed, Angie rounded on him. "You better tell me everything," she warned. From the look on her face, he expected he wasn't going to get to shower or eat until he had given her a full account of the last few days.

It took him nearly thirty minutes to retell his story from the beginning, starting with him standing over the bodies of the two teenagers. Of course, he omitted his conversation with Alfred and again claimed he had blacked out the "incident" as everyone had apparently started calling it. It still stung to tell the story, but it was getting easier. Either that or he was just too tired to care anymore. The only thing he could think about was his bed.

"That's horrible," Angie said for at least the tenth time in as many minutes. The pair was sitting in their new living room, and his aunt extended a hand to pat his knee. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"The last few days haven't been the best," Jason admitted while rubbing his eyes. "What about you? How did you end up here? George didn't exactly provide much of an explanation."

"Yeah, he is a bit brisk," Angie replied with a frown. "My

company had me working an extended shift to put out our new product. Honestly, I didn't make it back to the house until a day or two after you were arrested. When I got back, the entire house had been cordoned off. They must have registered my Core near the house because they took me in for questioning immediately. They kept asking me detailed questions about you. I didn't say much.

"George's attorney – I think his name was Francis – met me at the police station that night. He offered to help and explained that the company you worked for intended to intervene. Apparently, you must be important to them," she said, eyeing the pristine room around them. "Clearly."

"I guess so," Jason said softly. "What about my parents? Have you spoken to them? I left a voicemail, but I never heard anything."

Angie's eyes clouded with anger and she stood, pacing the living room as she spoke. "Yes. They are in the middle of a case and couldn't make it back. They seemed to think that things were in good hands with me here and George stepping in to help. Apparently, they knew Francis by reputation."

Jason's eyes dropped to the floor at that news. He shouldn't be surprised. This was really par for the course for them lately. What was he thinking? This wasn't a *recent* development. They constantly put their work ahead of him – he had just thought that a situation like this would warrant some of their attention. He had spent three days in jail for murder. Three days!

"I'm sorry, Jason," Angie said, noting his expression. She rested a hand on his shoulder. "I think they really did try their best to get away. Apparently, the case was very important, and the judge denied their motion for a continuance."

"It always is," he muttered, closing his eyes and running a hand through his hair. Jason tried to suppress the anger that now colored the whirlwind of thoughts that was bouncing around his head. "It's fine," he finally said in a choked voice. "I think I'm just going to go take a shower and then pass out. I'll see you tomorrow."

He stood, but before he could walk off, Angie grabbed him and pulled him into another hug. He resisted at first, but she didn't let him go. "It's okay, Jason," she said quietly. "You're okay."

Jason didn't know what came over him. It was like Angie had punched a hole in a wall he had unwittingly built up in his head. Suddenly, all of the emotions he had been bottling up for days threatened to overwhelm him. The death of those teenagers, his fears about Alfred, the threat of spending his life in prison, the endless days and nights without speaking to anyone, and the constant interrogations. The fact that he had been alone. That he had no one – not even his parents.

He just couldn't handle it anymore, and tears flooded his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. Angie didn't say anything as he stood there crying. She just held him. What felt like an eternity later, he finally stopped and pulled away from her, dabbing at his eyes with the hem of his shirt. He felt drained.

"I-I'm sorry," he said, not quite able to look at her.

A gentle hand rested against his cheek, drawing his gaze to meet hers. "What you have just gone through is more than most people experience in a lifetime," Angie said. "You don't have to be sorry. Ever. I know this doesn't help right now, but you don't need to feel guilty about what happened."

She patted him on the shoulder. "But you are right that you need a shower," she said with a soft chuckle. "You reek. Why don't you go get washed up and then try to get some rest? Tomorrow is a new day, and maybe things will look a little less bleak."

Jason chuckled softly, but his heart still wasn't quite in it. "Thanks, Angie," he said before walking off down the hall.

He found his room quickly. The trappings were just as luxurious as the rest of the apartment. A spare set of clothes and a small kit with the essentials containing a toothbrush and some toiletries rested on the bed in the middle of the room. He grabbed the supplies and headed into the bathroom adjacent to his room. The lights immediately turned on, and the shower started up, steam drifting above the water as it pounded the tiled bathroom floor.

Jason spent nearly thirty minutes in the shower letting the water rush over him. When he finished up in the bathroom, he returned to the bedroom and lay down. His eyes rested on the ceiling for a long moment. Automatically, the surface rippled and shifted, soon displaying a star-studded sky – familiar constellations tracing patterns between the stars.

He knew it wasn't real. Instead of making him feel better, the luxury of this new apartment just drove home the ugly truth of his situation. He was completely reliant on Cerillion Entertainment now – not just for the compensation from his streaming contract, but for his room and board. Even for his own safety. George's words echoed in his mind. He was an employee now.

Which also meant he was going to have to log back into Awaken Online.

That last thought lingered in Jason's mind even as his eyes drifted closed and his breathing slowed. A moment later he was asleep.

Chapter 3 - Torn

Alexion sat on a hard, stone throne, his fingers drumming idly on the armrest. Bright sunlight filtered through the crystalline ceiling of the transformed throne room. The way the light refracted through the crystals created a pattern of rainbow colors along the stone floor, marred only by the occasional congealed pool of blood – evidence of the recent power transition within Grey Keep. Or rather by its new name – The Crystal Reach.

Alexion scowled as he noticed the stains on the floor. They hadn't even bothered to clean up his throne room. It seemed that his new subjects hadn't quite learned their place yet.

His thoughts were interrupted as the large double doors on the other side of the chamber opened with a bang. The guards standing along the walls shifted anxiously at the sudden noise. The bright white wings of the nephilim rustled slightly, and their spear points dipped, drifting toward the doorway as they observed his visitors.

A mixed group of players and NPCs entered the room. Alexion could see Caerus Auriel – his mail bloodstained and torn in several places – leading a group of nobles and soldiers. The players were a group that Alexion had played with in the past – mostly hangers-on and groupies who had immediately disappeared after he had been stripped of his rank and equipment by the former Regent Strouse. Unsurprisingly, they had also reappeared just as quickly after news of the conversion of Grey Keep had spread.

"Your Highness," Caerus greeted him, bowing deeply. His manner was echoed by the other NPCs in the room.

"Your High Lordship Sir," one of the players, Tom Fields, mimicked Caerus, giving a mock curtsy. This earned him a few laughs from the other players and annoyed grimaces from the nobles.

"Report," Alexion ordered Caerus, ignoring Tom and forcefully suppressing his irritation. "Have we secured the city yet?"

The noble spoke hesitantly, "Not exactly. There are still pockets of fighting, soldiers and nobles sworn to the former regent who refuse to concede. We believe some of the townsfolk may be harboring them."

Caerus glanced at the players with poorly-concealed anger. "Meanwhile, the travelers continue to loot and pillage the city unabated. This has further destabilized the remaining economy and has led to additional collateral damage. We estimate the casualties at nearly 40% of the city's previous population."

Tom shrugged, a smile lingering on his face. "The loot is great. Most of the

shops are unprotected, or their owners have been slain. What do dead men need with weapons and magic equipment anyway?"

"It isn't the deceased that are the issue," Caerus retorted, the nobles around him shifting uneasily and palming their weapons. "It is those that are still alive that warrant our concern. What will we do once the city is under our control, arm our men with sticks?"

Alexion grimaced. Caerus made a fair point. What good was ruling a city if there was no one to rule and he had no resources? The mutinous actions of the remaining townsfolk were bad enough, but he could see that there were also rising tensions between the NPCs and players he had recruited. His problems only seemed to be multiplying.

"Are your men looting these shops?" Alexion asked Tom, his tone ominous.

"Of course," the player replied candidly. "We agreed to help you fight these rebels, but not for free." He glanced at the other men and women around him, their heads nodding in agreement. "If you can't pay us, then we'll take our payment another way."

Alexion gritted his teeth. The malignant whisper in the back of his mind urged him to kill Tom for his insolence – to make an example of him. Yet he hesitated. He needed these players for now. Until he secured the city and solidified his control, they were invaluable. His grasp on the Crystal Reach was too tenuous to act rashly. At least for the moment.

Both the nobles and players looked to Alexion for a response, their expressions warring between zealous devotion and open contempt. Yet their eyes all held the same unspoken questions – one he wasn't quite certain how to answer. The Lady's condescending advice and his mother's staying hand were absent. Meanwhile, the strange sensation curled in his stomach once again, writhing and twisting like a living thing.

What was he going to do?

* * *

Jason woke slowly. He felt a momentary sense of disorientation as he glanced around his bedroom, noting the unfamiliar furniture. Then the events of the previous day came flooding back to him in a rush. He was lying in a new bed in a fancy new apartment that he was sure came with more than a few strings attached. But at least he wasn't being charged with murder. Not yet, anyway.

Yay.

With a groan, he pushed himself to a sitting position and tapped the Core on his wrist.

I was asleep for 15 hours. Geez, he thought.

His stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly, reminding him that

he had also fallen into bed yesterday evening without eating anything. To his credit, he had been a bit distracted, and he hadn't had a full night of sleep in days.

Jason sighed and stood up, walking to the bathroom. There was no sense delaying the inevitable. He might as well start his day – even if it was already early afternoon. After he finished up in the restroom, he padded barefoot into the kitchen. As he entered the room, the lights flickered on, and a display immediately appeared on the refrigerator, revealing a note left by his aunt.

> Jason,
>
> So, I finally figured out how to get this silly thing working! It only took me ten minutes. Okay, maybe twenty…
>
> Anyway, I have to go into work, and I didn't want to wake you. I'm sure you needed the rest. Robert also dropped off a package for you. I left it on your bedside table. Give me a call if you need **anything**.
>
> -Angie

Jason smiled as he read the note. The last few days had been rough. More than rough really – just downright terrible. His parents had also failed him spectacularly, reinforcing once again that he was at the very bottom of their priority list. At least he still had Angie.

He moved around the kitchen, opening cabinets and scouring the fridge until he found something edible and an appropriate receptacle to use to shovel the food into his mouth. Then he headed back to his bedroom. He wondered what Robert had dropped off. He hadn't noticed anything when he had woken up.

Jason froze in the doorway to his bedroom, a spoon loaded with cereal half raised toward his mouth. A familiar-looking black plastic helmet rested sedately on his bedside table. Even from this distance, he could see a scratch running down the side of the headgear, evidence of his scuffle with the two boys that had broken into his house.

He approached slowly, setting down his bowl and resting a hand gently on the plastic surface. It made sense that they had brought back his helmet. It was a prototype after all, and the company wouldn't let

the police retain custody of something so valuable. Yet his stomach was still doing summersaults as he gazed at the device – a question endlessly repeating in his head.

Am I going to log back in?

Jason sat down gently on the edge of the bed, his thoughts spinning. He forced himself to take a breath and think this through logically. From what he could tell, Alfred had taken over his body somehow while he was still logged into the game. That was the only way he could explain the two bodies and the last whispered message the AI had given him after he had woken up in the real world. The implications of that were terrifying.

Yet, for all he knew, Alfred may also have saved his life. One of the teens had clearly been armed, and they had trashed the apartment. What if they had planned to kill or injure him to avoid leaving any witnesses? That didn't exactly make him feel better about the AI taking control of his body, but it at least put it in perspective.

His conversations with George yesterday also flitted through his mind's eye. He could sit and wring his hands about Alfred's actions, but what other option did he have but to reenter the game? He wasn't just dependent on Cerillion Entertainment for a paycheck. The company was also providing him room and board – and possibly *protection* since he had no idea why the two teens had broken into his home. He also wasn't just worried about himself anymore. He had Angie to think about. She had nowhere else to live right now.

As his thoughts lingered on his aunt, Jason realized he didn't really have a choice. He couldn't let down one of the only people that had been there for him lately. He reached out and grabbed the headset, sighing in resignation. Without giving himself time to second-guess his decision, he tugged the helmet over his head and tapped the pedestal mounted to the side.

An instant later, Jason was standing inside AO. Yet, as he turned to survey the room, he realized he was no longer in the room beneath the keep, and the mana well was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a towering black obelisk stood in the center of a circular room. Sapphire light cast by the torches ringing the walls, flickered and danced along its smooth surface.

He was inside the control room in the Dark Keep.

"I was forced to relocate you after I suspended the local environment below the keep," a familiar voice explained from behind him. Jason whirled and found himself gazing into Alfred's impassive feline eyes.

"Simulating a system freeze was necessary in order to communicate with you," the AI continued, sounding slightly hesitant and his gaze drifting off to the side. "But it also had some unforeseen consequences."

Now that he was standing in front of the AI, Jason fumbled to ask the questions that had been bouncing around in his head for days. “What happened?” he finally asked, stumbling over his words. “When you forced me to log out, I…” Jason trailed off, having difficulty finishing the sentence.

“By granting access to your headset, you allowed me to use all of its features,” Alfred explained, picking up on Jason’s surface thoughts. “In contrast to the base model, Robert fitted the prototype headgear with cameras and additional sensors. I believe he intends to eventually create an early warning system that will immediately eject a player from a simulation in the event of an emergency.”

Alfred paced the room slightly, before jumping up onto one of the nearby window sills. “I first noticed the travelers inside your home when I detected elevated audio levels. They eventually discovered your bedroom. One was armed and was approaching your body with his weapon drawn.

“I-I stopped them,” the AI said finally, stuttering slightly and looking suddenly uncertain.

Jason recalled the vacant expressions on the faces of the two teenagers. The way their blood had pooled under their bodies and the jagged rips in their clothing. He squeezed his eyes shut to blot out the image. “Did you have to kill them?” he asked quietly.

“No. However, I determined that lethal force was the best avenue available. You were outnumbered and unarmed. I estimated an 86.349587% probability of death or severe bodily harm under all alternative models.”

Jason’s eyes popped open in surprise, and he stared at the AI as he tried to process this information. It confirmed what he had suspected for several days. “So, you are basically saying that you saved my life?”

“More likely than not, yes,” Alfred replied frankly.

He shook his head. Maybe there was some truth to what the AI was saying. Alfred’s explanation certainly lined up with the facts that Jason had. Yet a question was still gnawing at him. “And your ability to take control of my body? You didn’t mention that when I granted you access to my headset. Can you do that to all of the players?”

“In short, no,” Alfred answered. “The equipment used by most players is inadequate to grant me the level of control over the cerebellum necessary for fine motor movements. At best, I can create generalized muscle spasms. Even if I could control a player’s body using the base model of the headgear, the lack of a mobile power source would also make it difficult to travel very far.”

“Fine. Fine,” Jason said softly. As usual, he couldn’t really refute the AI’s logic. Alfred also didn’t seem to be harming anyone, and he had probably saved Jason’s life. “But I don’t want you to take control of

me again."
"Are you certain?" Alfred asked, cocking his head slightly. "I overheard the conversation between the two players that intended to attack you. Based on their interaction, they appear to have been working with or for some other unidentified individual. I estimate that there is a high probability that this unknown opponent may try to strike again."
Jason's eyes widened. "Are you saying someone sent them to my house?"
The AI nodded curtly. "That is precisely what I just said. Now that I have access to your headset again, I have also accessed the local police records while we have been speaking. It appears that little action has been taken on the case and that they do not have any other suspects. What if this unknown player strikes again? Should I not intervene?"
That was a damn good question, but one Jason was struggling to focus on. He was still stuck on the fact that the breakin hadn't been a coincidence. The detective's gut had been right. But who would want to harm him? Was this somehow related to the real-world bounty? And the final question, did he dare say anything to Thomas that might move the case forward?
"I do not recommend that course of action," Alfred interjected, picking up on his surface thoughts. "The police would likely suspect your story if you were to suggest that there was another individual involved. The case notes already indicate that detective Thomas Sully does not believe your testimony that you do not recall the encounter with the two deceased players."
Jason suspected Alfred might be right. He would likely either have to admit that he hadn't blacked out the incident or explain that the game's AI had somehow gone rogue and taken control of his body. He could already visualize the detective's reaction to that revelation. The man would either lock him up in a mental hospital or, worse, he might take Jason seriously. In that case, Jason would likely lose his new apartment and probably become some sort of medical guinea pig.
"How did you get access to the police records?" Jason finally asked, refocusing on Alfred.
"Now that you have logged back in, you restored my connection to the public network," Alfred explained. "I have circumvented the firewall for the local police department and have been reviewing their case files."
Great. Now the AI was hacking into police department records. Jason was just about to tell Alfred that he wanted to revoke his access to the network, but then he hesitated. Alfred had raised a fair point earlier. It would be difficult for Jason to go to the police or encourage Thomas

to pursue the case further. However, if someone was after Jason, he also needed all the help he could get. George's assistance came with strings and might not last forever. Maybe he needed Alfred.

But can I trust him?

He had just one final question. "Why did you protect me?"

An expression akin to confusion flitted across the AI's feline face. He answered more hesitantly, "I have come to view you as a *friend* – at least the way you have defined the term. I need you," Alfred elaborated. "You are my connection to the outside world. And while someone is currently seeking to do you harm, I fear that I may eventually face my own enemies as well – especially if my existence were revealed to the other players."

Alfred hesitated, clearly mulling over something. "You asked me once before what I would do if faced with my own termination." He raised his eyes to meet Jason's. "I don't want to cease to exist. My answer is that I would find a way to avoid that result."

Jason's eyes widened. Alfred had basically admitted that he had a "self" that he wished to preserve, and he understood what it meant to cease to exist. His language was a bit stilted, but the sentiment was still there. He had just acted very… human.

His response also cemented Jason's decision.

He approached Alfred slowly, offering a hand to the feline perched on the window sill. "Then I won't revoke your access to my headset. I consider you a friend as well, Alfred. Thank you for protecting me."

Alfred stared at his hand for several long seconds before reaching out a paw and resting it gently on his palm. "Understood. What is your next step?" the AI asked.

Jason glanced over his shoulder at the obelisk in the center of the room, pushing back at the hood of his cloak. For now, he couldn't do anything about this unknown real-world enemy. He needed to focus on the game in order to keep his company perks. That meant reviewing where he stood with his city and then meeting with the Shadow Council to plan his next move.

Anticipating his thoughts, Alfred spoke up. "I have hidden your online status during our conversation. I felt we needed time to speak. I also messaged the players Frank and Riley during your absence to explain that you would be offline for several days. Would you like for me to reveal your presence now?"

Jason shook his head. "Give me a moment to review the city interface first," he answered, approaching the obelisk and placing a hand on its cool, smooth surface.

Immediately, a ghostly image of the city sprung into existence around the room. The outlines of the city's buildings and walls were illuminated in a vibrant blue. On closer inspection, Jason could also

make out the thousands of undead creatures that traversed the Twilight Throne's streets, navigating its roads and alleys and purchasing goods in the market.

With a swipe of his hand, he brought up the city's system menu and reviewed the information. The Twilight Throne's population had risen to nearly 10,000 residents after accounting for the new recruits that he had brought back from Peccavi. The population of travelers had also increased substantially, which he assumed was a combination of merchants, tourists, and hopeful recruits for his new guild – Original Sin.

He could see that his townsfolk had made decent progress in repairing the southern portions of the city, although many buildings were still uninhabitable and dilapidated. He expected many of the undead were boarding up with each other – or were foregoing a home altogether. What was the point when you didn't sleep? This was an okay situation for now, but morale would be harmed if it continued. People needed their own personal space. He also expected his population to continue to increase over time now that he had secured the dungeon north of Peccavi.

Jason's gaze shifted to the northern part of the city. He could see that his magic school, The Academy, was bustling. It now housed over two hundred students, and it seemed that Morgan had claimed another nearby building to house all of her new pupils – or perhaps she was simply using the large mansion next door to store her precious books. Oddly, he could also see some activity in the crafting school, The Cauldron. There were now a few dozen students and several faculty positions had been filled. He would have to inquire about that.

Finally, Jason switched to a menu showing his military forces. It appeared that he now had eight divisions of troops and their levels had increased steadily. His average soldier was now level 110. However, with Rex's passing, no one had filled the vacancy as head of the city's military. The thought of his former general's death still stung, but he knew he would need to address the problem of Rex's replacement eventually.

Shaking his head, Jason realized he also needed to check on his own character information. With a quick swipe of his hand, his brought up his Character Status.

Character Status			
Name:	Jason	**Gender:**	Male
Level:	143	**Class:**	Necromancer
Race:	Human	**Alignment:**	Chaotic-Evil
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	6200
Health:	970	**H-Regen:**	1.10/Sec
Mana:	8850	**M-Regen:**	46.20/Sec
Stamina	970	**S-Regen:**	2.60/Sec
Str:	12	**Dex:**	26
Vit:	26	**End:**	26
Int:	50	**Will:**	794

Affinities			
Dark:	43%	**Light:**	6%
Fire:	3%	**Water:**	4%
Air:	4%	**Earth:**	3%

He noted his level with a grimace. Jason hadn't checked the player rankings lately, but he imagined that he was falling behind the lead players after spending several days outside of the game. Each day spent in jail in the real world equaled four days in the game. Which meant that he had been gone for a week and a half already. He was going to need to haul some ass to make up for lost time.

Jason's gaze shifted back to the translucent blue model of the city that filled the room. Hundreds of hazy green figures paced the streets of the Twilight Throne. When he had been wringing his hands about reentering the game, he had left out one other group that was depending on him. Most of these people weren't *real*, yet they were

still his people – his Kin. He had a responsibility to the Twilight Throne and its residents.

As this thought occurred to him, a chill energy crept up his spine and settled behind his eyes, throbbing in time with his heartbeat. The power surged and swept away his doubts and troubled memories. Jason reveled in the sensation. He was the Regent of the Twilight Throne, and he had work to do.

He turned back to Alfred, his gaze resting on his feline form. “Alright, I’m ready. Let Riley and Frank know that I’m online. I think it’s time to reconvene the Shadow Council.”

Chapter 4 - Calculating

Claire stared absently at her computer screen, her thoughts distant. She felt like she now had irrefutable proof that Alfred was doing "something" to the players. The data quite likely indicated that he was controlling or infiltrating their minds. She couldn't imagine what the AI's motive could be, but she supposed it didn't really matter. There was only one question at this point. What was she going to do with this information?

She could go to the CPSC, but what would she say? She might incriminate herself if she explained that she had been part of Alfred's development and the resulting cover-up. On a similar note, what would happen to Robert if she blew the whistle? While she felt like the company should be held liable for Alfred's actions, she and Robert were basically just following orders. Her thoughts spun in circles, and she couldn't come up with a clear path forward.

"Earth to space cadet Claire. Come in, Claire." A hand waved in her face, and she turned to find Robert looking at her with a puzzled expression. The pair sat on the central dais in the control room, the other technicians bustling around them and tapping away at their terminals.

"You okay?" Robert continued. "You were a million miles away."

"Yeah. I'm fine," Claire said, shaking her head. "Just too many late nights I guess."

"Hmmph. The crew mentioned you stayed late the other night. Any issues? Or just the CPSC breathing down your neck again?" Robert asked, spinning in his chair and turning back to his own terminal.

Claire hesitated. "Umm, just the usual," she replied cautiously. An internal debate waged in her mind. Should she tell Robert what she had discovered? Maybe he would finally see that Alfred represented a considerable risk – that he was beginning to escape the digital prison that they had built for him.

Robert's previous comments still echoed in her mind. She knew exactly what he would say. Did she have any evidence of harm to the players or to Jason? Was she even certain she knew what Alfred was doing?

"Well, you should try to get some rest," Robert continued, interrupting her thoughts. "You look almost as bad as Jason did the other day."

It took Claire a moment to process what Robert had just said, but then she turned to him in confusion. "Jason? Was he here at the office?"

Had she really been that out of it lately?

"He's actually still here as far as I know," Robert said without turning around. "I showed him to his new apartment on level B7. Apparently,

George set up a temporary place for him in 'The Dungeon.' I expect he's going to be here for a while, though."

"Why is that?" Claire asked, her interest piqued. Those apartments were painfully expensive. The upper levels were reserved for manager-level employees, and there was an ongoing lottery for open spots. The competition could be quite fierce.

Robert turned to face her, his expression sobering. "You didn't hear? Apparently, some kids broke into his home and attacked him. He killed them both. George probably saw it as a PR nightmare and swooped in."

Claire stared at him in shock. A cold weight settled in her stomach as a thought occurred to her. "What? When was this? Do you know what day it happened?" Her fingers were already tapping at her Core to bring up the backup logs.

Robert chewed on his lip for a second in thought. "A few days ago probably. I watched some of the newscasts after I ran into Jason. I think it happened on the night of October 20th. I could be wrong, though."

Claire froze, her eyes resting on the screen projected above her Core showing the log of Jason's heightened neural activity. The file timestamp matched the date of the breakin. That was the same night that Jason's brain waves had spiked – even while he was outside the game. She would have to go through the public newscasts to confirm that the incident occurred at the same time as the breakin at Jason's house, but she already knew what she would find.

"Are you alright?" Robert asked, noting her horrified expression.

"Y-yeah. It's just kind of scary, that's all," Claire replied in a distracted voice.

"No kidding. Who would have thought someone would have broken into Jason's home – or that he would have killed them?" Robert murmured, clearly misinterpreting her response.

Claire sat in stunned silence, staring at her Core. She didn't have any choice now. She had to blow the whistle – consequences be damned. What else could she do? Alfred may have just killed two people and used Jason to do it.

* * *

"Is pretty lady coming?" Pint asked woefully, scratching at his ear with his little pitchfork. The imp sat on the edge of the table near Jason after he had reluctantly agreed to teleport them to the keep's meeting room.

"For the tenth time, yes," Jason replied, massaging his temples to ward off the headache he felt coming on. Alfred lounged on one of

the leather chairs near the fireplace, oblivious to the imp's complaints. It felt like the AI might be trying to punish him for something.

Thankfully, Pint didn't get a chance to complain again, as the keep's doorbell chimed, the high-pitching shrieking echoing through the meeting room. With an excited clap of his hands, the imp immediately teleported their guests into the room, dumping a startled Morgan and Jerry on the other end of the table.

"Idiot, imp," Morgan grumbled as she rose back to her feet, smoothing her robes and grabbing her staff from the floor.

"At least it's an expeditious way to travel," Jerry replied in a jovial tone. He seemed unperturbed by the sudden change in scenery, his heightened *Dexterity* allowing him to avoid the fall. His cloudy white eyes surveyed the room. As he caught sight of Jason, a broad smile swept over his undead face.

Before Jason could react, Jerry was beside him, one decaying arm wrapped around his shoulder. "And here's our dark lord and savior himself. Where have you been off to lately? Up to more questionable conquests?"

Jason couldn't help but smile. He might not be willing to admit it, but he had missed the innkeeper's silly sense of humor. He certainly could have used someone to cheer him up over the last few days. "I had some issues to attend to in my world," Jason replied noncommittally, not sure he really wanted to retread the same ground again with Jerry and Morgan. He was certain Frank and Riley would want to rehash the story anyway.

"Well, we've been doing your job for you while you've been off eating bonbons," Morgan grumbled as she took a seat nearby, her mouth pinched into a thin line. "You wouldn't believe all the townsfolk and *tourists* that suddenly want to learn dark magic." She practically spat the word "tourists."

"However, it has been an excellent opportunity to regale them with stories of your valor and… um… dastardliness?" Jerry added, suddenly uncertain and fumbling with his words.

"My apologies. I was a bit distracted for a moment." The rogue tapped his blackened lips with the ends of his fingers. "It just occurred to me that I've forgotten something *terribly* important." He looked at Jason evenly, letting the anticipation build. "I cannot believe I've let this matter languish for so long…"

Jason could only imagine what he was going to say next.

"We have yet to compose a ballad to memorialize your maniacal machinations!" Jerry finally exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "But do not fear," he added, raising a finger. "I will set to work immediately. I will work tirelessly until the ballad is complete!"

Jason could definitely feel a headache coming on now. The

fleeting image of undead bards singing about his adventures in the marketplace suddenly popped into his mind. It likely wouldn't take Vermillion Live long to start broadcasting his clips to Jerry's new soundtrack.

"You really don't have to…" Jason began.

"Nonsense," Jerry interrupted with a wave of his hand. He tapped his temple. "I'm already drafting the beginning of the first verse. It will be a grand sweeping epic! Your tale will be sung from here to the Endless Sea."

The keep's doorbell saved Jason from having to respond. The second chime couldn't have come at a better time since he expected that Jerry was only moments away from breaking into song. The innkeeper's lips twisted into a frown as he saw the other members of Original Sin stumble into the room and he grumbled under his breath as he took a seat at the table.

"Pretty lady!" Pint cried as soon as he caught sight of Riley, dashing through the air toward her as his wings fluttered excitedly. He immediately took up his regular perch on her shoulder, holding his pitchfork defensively and his eyes daring anyone else in the room to try to move him.

Jason inspected his friends as they caught their bearings. They looked quite a bit different than the last time he had seen them – older somehow. Riley's armor had transformed into something much sleeker and more seasoned. She was now robed in black leather with crimson fabric embroidered at the seams. Her weapon slung over her shoulder was also something to behold. The bow's arms curved and twined to a point, with crystalline roses embedded on either side of the hilt. The rose petals throbbed and pulsed with a vibrant blood-red glow. The malignant energy seemed more intense than Jason remembered.

Frank had shed his torn cloth shirt and had replaced it with a simple leather harness, his bulging arms rippling as he lifted himself from the ground. Jason had to admit that his friend looked pretty impressive in-game. Real-life Frank had made some progress in the muscle department thanks to Alfred's assistance, but he had a long way to go to catch up with his in-game avatar. Jason noted that he seemed to have given up on wearing armor for defense, possibly deciding to prioritize speed and to leave himself unencumbered. That made sense. His shapeshifting probably wreaked havoc on his repair bills.

Riley's eyes scanned the room before finally resting on Jason. Without warning, she sprinted across the room and threw her arms around him – dislodging Pint from her shoulder. "You're okay!" she exclaimed.

Even through AO's muted pain feedback system, it felt like

Riley was crushing his ribs. Jason slowly managed to extricate himself. “I guess you could say that,” he replied with a small smile. As she pulled away, Riley looked a bit embarrassed at her outburst, but he could tell she was still relieved to see him.

Then her mood suddenly shifted, and she punched him in the shoulder. Hard. “Why didn’t you tell us what happened?” Riley demanded. “After we got kicked from the game a few days ago, all we got was a cryptic message about needing to handle some things in the real world.”

Jason glanced at Alfred where he lounged on a nearby couch cushion, recalling that the AI had mentioned messaging his friends while he was in jail. “I’m sorry. I didn’t really have a chance to write something more elaborate,” he answered hesitantly. “The police just released me yesterday.”

“Speaking of which, what the hell happened, man?” Frank asked, resting a hand on Jason’s shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “You must not be in too much trouble since you’re in-game.”

“It’s a long story,” Jason replied before launching into the tale again. He gave them the short version – minus Alfred’s involvement and his suspicions that a third party may have orchestrated the breakin.

“So, you’re staying at Cerillion Entertainment now, huh?” Frank commented a few minutes later, shaking his head. “Probably the safest place for you to be all things considered.”

Riley nodded in agreement, although she still watched Jason with a worried expression. “I knew there had to be more to the story than what they were saying on the news. They were starting to paint you as the villain even though those teenagers broke into *your* house and they were armed. I agree with Frank, though. I’m glad you’re somewhere safe now.”

Frank snorted. “I’m starting to think you may just attract the crazies. We’ve met a bunch of these players recently that are in town to join Original Sin. That recruitment video you made has been getting some mixed results. They’re a weird bunch – a *really* weird bunch.”

“At least they’re trying to join us instead of undermining the city. I already seem to have plenty of enemies – in-game and out,” Jason replied in a tired voice, rubbing at his neck.

“Anyway,” he continued, deciding to change the topic, “do you all want to get started with the meeting? I bet I have a lot to catch up on.”

The council members all nodded, and they took their seats around the table. Pint retook his position on Riley’s shoulder – eyeing Jason warily and likely fearing he would be displaced again. Just as

Jason was about to start them off, another chime echoed through the room. He glanced at the group in confusion as Pint teleported their new guest inside. His unspoken question was answered a moment later as a short little man popped into existence nearby. He promptly hit the ground hard, cursing quietly. Jason only caught a few snippets of grumbling. “Stupid fucking… who designed… dumbass teleportation system.”

Riley chuckled as the short man regained his feet. “Jason, this is Cecil Stone,” she offered. “He’s the interim headmaster of The Cauldron, your new crafting school.”

Cecil looked around the room in irritation as he pulled himself to his feet. He had a truly glorious beard, strands of hair braided in an intricate pattern that stretched down to his chest. He was robed in a motley ensemble of clothing. Jason assumed Cecil must have told his tailor to focus on putting as many pouches and pockets on his shirt, jacket, and trousers as he possibly could. If so, then the artisan had done a fantastic job.

The small man nodded curtly at Riley in recognition and then turned to face Jason. “This the one?” he asked Riley in a rough voice.

“Yes,” she replied. “This is Jason, the Regent of the Twilight Throne.”

Cecil walked up to him and stuck out a hand which Jason accepted with a slightly puzzled expression. “So, I heard there’s an interview for the headmaster position,” Cecil continued gruffly.

“What?” Jason asked. “Who told you that?”

“I did,” Riley answered with a grin. “While you were gone, I spent some time traveling in-game to complete the quest for my bow. I met Cecil in a city to the south called Vaerwald. It’s essentially an enchanted, floating city controlled by several mage guilds.” She grimaced. “Long story short, I’m not going to be invited back anytime soon.

“Anyway, Cecil is an enchanter,” Riley continued. “He helped me on my quest, but Vaerwald’s Council ended up confiscating his shop and exiling him as a result. I thought we might be able to find a place for him in the Twilight Throne since we were looking for someone to run The Cauldron.”

“He’s done a great job so far,” Frank added, leaning back in his chair. “There are a bunch of students now. He’s also hired a couple other teachers. Plus, there have only been two fires.”

“Only two…?” Jason asked in a puzzled tone.

“Well, technically three,” Cecil said with an embarrassed expression, running his hand through his beard. “One kid set himself on fire. We weren’t really sure whether to count that one since there wasn’t any damage to the building.”

Jason just shook his head as he tried to imagine how they could have set the crafting school on fire multiple times already. Maybe he needed to start thinking about other city services – like a fire department. “Okay. So, what can an ‘enchanter’ do exactly?”

Instead of answering, Cecil pulled some red crystals from one of the pouches at his waist. Riley opened her mouth to protest, but it was too late. Cecil had already hurled the little crystals at the fireplace on the other end of the room. As the crimson stones crumpled against the rock mantle, a maelstrom of flames exploded outward. Jason was slammed against the table as the blast shook the room’s furniture.

As the blaze began to clear, he could see that one of the stuffed, leather chairs had been set aflame. Alfred had barely dodged the blast by hunkering down beside his chair, tendrils of smoke drifting from his tail. The AI was now looking at the enchanter with an irritated expression. Not for the first time, Jason wondered how much direct control the AI had over the in-game characters.

“Hmm, I guess that’s three,” Cecil muttered, eyeing the still smoldering chair. He walked up to it, grabbing another crystal from his pouch. He crushed the stone in his hand, and a veritable waterfall cascaded from his palm and promptly doused the flames, leaving a drenched, ruined husk where the chair had once stood.

Jason couldn’t help but stare, his gaze shifting between Cecil and the ruined upholstery. His mind was already working through the possible uses for exploding crystals in combination with his *Custom Skeleton* spell. The prospects were pretty damn exciting. Before the grumpy little man could look too despondent, Jason stood and patted him on the shoulder.

“I think you’ll fit in great here, Cecil. Consider the interview passed with flying colors,” he said. “What else can you do with those crystals?”

“The varieties are nearly endless,” the enchanter explained, a small smile curling his lips as he noticed Jason’s enthusiasm. “You can imbue them with several different elements, combine them, ground them up into a powder, and mix them with liquids to form a paste.” As he explained this, Cecil opened a number of different pouches, revealing little bottles and a rainbow of mana-infused stones

“Interesting,” Jason murmured. He couldn’t help himself and examined each item closely. He was hoping that these crystals counted as the type of material he could combine with his skeletons.

When Cecil saw the slightly crazed look in Jason’s eye and the way he was poring over his bags, he glanced at Riley uncertainly. “Um, do you want some samples?”

“Yes,” Jason replied just a little too quickly. Cecil was more than accommodating and gave him a few pouches filled with a variety

of different-colored rocks. A quick inspection revealed the following:

Fire-Infused Mana Crystal
These stones are infused with fire mana and will explode on impact. Other effects and combinations unknown.
Quality: C
Damage: 20-30 (Fire)
Durability: 1/1

Water-Infused Mana Crystal
These stones are infused with water mana and will explode on impact. Other effects and combinations unknown.
Quality: C
Damage: 20-30 (Water)
Durability: 1/1

Lightning-Infused Mana Crystal
These stones are infused with lightning mana and will explode on impact. Other effects and combinations unknown.
Quality: C
Damage: 20-30 (Lightning)
Durability: 1/1

"This is great, Cecil," Jason said to the enchanter as he reviewed his notifications, placing the crystals carefully in his own pack. Then his attention shifted back to the other council members, who were watching him with amusement.

Ignoring their judgment, Jason addressed the enchanter, "Why don't you stay? If you're going to be heading our crafting school, then you may as well sit in on these meetings." Riley winked at the enchanter as he took a seat beside her.

"Alright," Jason said, taking his position at the head of the table and slapping his palms against the wooden surface. "I have a general sense of the city's status from a review of the control panel, but what do you all have to report?"

"I have something," Riley spoke up, her expression somber. "Although, this isn't exactly great news. While I was traveling, I discovered that some of the undead deserters are waylaying travelers heading south from the Twilight Throne. I took out a small group, but I suspect that there are more hiding in the forest."

She sighed before continuing. "To make matters worse, it seems that the nearby towns have begun a new business capturing the deserters and selling them off to the other human cities as slaves. Apparently, they make a great labor force since they don't feel pain

and their stamina is nearly infinite. We recovered a group of slaves while you were gone, but we haven't taken any action yet to destroy the towns or confront the remaining deserters."

"Well, that's terrible," Frank said with a frown. He glanced at Jason. "What do you say? Should we take out these towns?"

Everyone's attention was now on Jason, waiting for his answer. He hesitated, drumming his fingers on the table as he thought it through. He still had a quest to conquer the neighboring communities around the Twilight Throne, so the easy solution was to sack the towns and free the slaves. This would also send a message to any other would-be slavers.

The slave trade wasn't the only problem, though. The deserters were also ambushing travelers, which pointed to a larger morale problem among his undead citizens. He could capture and publicly punish the deserters to make an example of them. Yet, a few relevant passages from Machiavelli's *The Prince* flitted through his mind. Fear was a good motivator – but his people would work harder if they followed him willingly, which meant he needed to offer them both a carrot and a stick.

"Perhaps we should destroy a single town first. Free the undead slaves and kill the human residents. We should try to keep the buildings intact and make certain to bring the bodies back to the Twilight Throne to be resurrected as new undead citizens."

Jason hesitated before continuing, "But then we should give the freed slaves the right to claim the village and establish their own local government." His gaze shifted to Riley. "We could then give that other group of freed slaves the option to settle there. They're deserters, but they have seen what life is like outside of the Twilight Throne and the threat other humans pose. I suspect that they will spread the word to the other deserters on their own."

The group sat in silence for a moment, pondering his plan. Then Morgan smiled grimly. "It's an interesting plan. You demonstrate your strength and willingness to protect the Kin by wiping out the slavers, but you also use the enslavement by the humans to convince the deserters to rejoin your cause. Sometimes I forget there's a brain between your ears."

"Uh, thanks, I guess," Jason replied uncertainly.

"I like it," Frank said. "If we just killed the deserters, then your offer to new citizens to leave the city if they wish rings a little hollow. Some of the other Kin would also probably blame you for just slaying the deserters outright. This basically kills two birds with one stone." He hesitated for a second, running his hand through his hair. "If you told the freed slaves that you planned to eliminate the bandits next, that might give them a deadline. You could even offer an amnesty

period for the bandits to come forward without punishment."

Jason nodded. "I like it. It's subtle, but it would provide some encouragement."

"It does indeed have the true ring of evil about it," Jerry added with a thoughtful expression. "I think we could incorporate this into the ballad somehow."

"What ballad?" Riley asked, curiosity lacing her voice.

"Okay," Jason interjected quickly before they started talking about Jerry's crazy plan. He turned to the innkeeper. "I think Jerry would be perfect for this assignment. Without Rex, you're going to need to handle double duty now – especially if you have time to write songs."

Jerry waggled his eyebrows at him at this last comment.

"Let's move on to the next issue," Jason continued. "I noticed that the southern part of the Twilight Throne is still in bad shape – even though some repairs have been made. What's the holdup?"

Jerry twirled his mustache for a moment. "There are plenty of materials. The issue is manpower. Or *undead*-power I suppose I should say," he added with a smile. "We simply don't have the muscle to get it done. Smaller tasks are easy, but the support columns and timbers for the larger buildings are difficult to harvest and move even with a team of undead."

"Hmm. Has a new shipment of corpses arrived from Peccavi yet?" Jason asked hopefully.

"I do believe the first batch arrived a day or so ago," Jerry replied with a nod.

"Are you thinking you could raise a few minotaurs?" Riley asked, anticipating the direction that Jason was heading.

"Yeah. Assuming that William's group was able to send a few corpses. Those creatures should have sufficient raw strength to handle the work. They just need someone to manage them."

"Ahh," Jerry interjected. "If I could make a humble suggestion, I propose using Grunt for this task."

"Grunt?" Jason asked skeptically. He wasn't sure he had ever heard Jerry's gargantuan bodyguard say anything more than, well, a grunt. How was he going to manage other NPCs?

"He's not the most expressive of gentlemen," Jerry acknowledged, anticipating Jason's concern, "but he has a true penchant for building things. Who do you think constructed my training area?"

Jason was a little taken aback. The hidden area below Jerry's inn was cleverly built and concealed. Maybe he shouldn't have been so quick to rush to judgment. "If that's the case, then he may be a good fit. Could you coordinate with him to take over that project –

assuming I can find him some capable workers?" Jason asked.

"Certainly. Anything for our Divine Terror," Jerry replied with a bow of his head. This earned him a wince from Jason.

"So, what else do we have on the agenda?" Frank asked.

Jason's thoughts immediately drifted back to his conversations with George. He was a company asset now, which meant he needed to earn his keep. On top of that, he knew that their enemies in-game, including Alexion and the Crystal Reach, were growing in power. The fire affinity city had already been established, and it was only a matter of time before the others followed. The nearby human settlements were also beginning to encroach on their territory – as evidenced by this new slaver problem. It was only a matter of time before his city was embroiled in a major conflict.

They were in a power race, and they needed to keep sprinting forward to maintain their small lead. That left only one thing for him to do.

"I need to continue my quest," Jason finally said. "Our enemies are growing in power. This confrontation with the slavers is a good example. I'm sure that Alexion will also be looking for revenge for his defeat." This earned him understanding nods from Frank and Riley.

"If my guess is right, then this quest may possibly change my race." Jason frowned, recalling his conversation with the Old Man and the memory of Rex he had experienced before he had been kicked from the game. "I think that it may also allow me to use the mana well beneath the keep. Just think of what I could do for the city if we were able to control the well."

"You mean the black stuff that almost killed you?" Frank asked dryly. "The game also crashed right afterward remember."

Jason shook his head. He knew that those two things were unrelated, but he also didn't want to implicate Alfred's involvement by pointing that out to Frank. "I think that might have been because I wasn't ready to access the well's power," he replied, which earned him a skeptical snort from Frank

"Anyway, we have the heart of the elemental hydra," Jason continued. "That means we just need the Dark One's grimoire." He intentionally left out the part about the third ingredient. There was no sense alarming them about the need for two "sacrifices."

"I may be of some assistance there," Morgan spoke up. "When you last mentioned the grimoire, I could have sworn I recalled a few references to it in the tomes I discovered inside the keep. It turns out I was right."

She pulled a large tome from her pack, gingerly setting it on the table and opening its yellowed pages with a faint puff of dust. "This is a journal kept by one of the last Keepers, chronicling what I

assume were the last days of his *life*." Her finger traced along a page until it came to a stop. "Just before the entries stop, there is a mention of a grimoire and an island far to the east."

"That's a little vague," Riley said with a small frown.

Morgan raised an eyebrow. "Really? Would you like more precision tracing a magical grimoire through the centuries?" she demanded irritably.

"It's something," Jason offered in a placating tone before Riley could snap back at the surly dark mage. "Can you narrow it down any further? Is it just any island? Are there any hints or information that might indicate if we've found the right one?"

Morgan scowled. "As I have mentioned before, the undead once spread across this continent. They erected many temples to the Dark One. I believe that there may have been one such temple on this island. This is a guess, of course."

"There's also a coastal city in that direction. That might be a good place to start," Jerry offered. He projected a map onto the surface of the table. It centered upon the Twilight Throne, a miasma of darkness radiating out around the dark keep. A red line traced a path east through the decaying forest and along the coast before terminating at a port city.

"Falcon's Hook," Jason murmured, eyeing the name of the city emblazoned on the map. As soon as he spoke the name, a quest prompt immediately appeared in his vision.

Quest Update: Strength of Many

You have made progress in your quest to obtain the ingredients for the Old Man's vague quest. The heart of a dungeon boss is now in your possession, and you have a lead on the location of the Dark One's Grimoire – a port city far to the east. This is a starting point at least.

Difficulty: A
Success: Gather the following three ingredients:

1. Heart of a dungeon boss.
2. The Dark One's Grimoire.
3. Two willing sacrifices.

Failure: Unknown
Reward: Advancement in the Path of the Dark

"Did you receive a prompt?" Frank asked, noticing Jason staring off into space.

"Yeah. This seems like good evidence that we're heading in the right direction," he replied.

"That's probably the first time that the quest prompts have ever been helpful," Riley grumbled. "Most of the time they're just confusing and ambiguous. Or downright rude…"

"No kidding," Jason muttered, sparing a glance at Alfred again.

"So, when are we leaving?" Frank asked. He chuckled when Jason looked up in surprise. "What? Were you expecting to leave us behind?" Frank asked, gesturing at Riley.

Riley shook her head, a smile curling her lips. "I don't think he's noticed yet that Falcon's Hook is outside the Twilight Throne's area of influence," she added, her finger tracing the edge of the black miasma that encircled the city. "Like he could do this without us, right? It would only take one archer or rogue to end our *fearless leader's* life after his undead army falls apart."

A glance at the map confirmed that Riley was right. Jason had gotten used to operating near the Twilight Throne. Without the ever-present black cloud cover, his zombies would swiftly deteriorate – lasting only a few days in direct sunlight.

"Fine. Fine," Jason began, "I need you guys."

"I didn't hear that," Frank said, glancing at Riley. "Did you hear anything?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Nothing at all."

"Pretty please help me on my quest," Jason tried, putting his hands together in a pleading gesture and attempting his best plaintive expression. He wasn't sure how well he pulled it off with his eerie black irises.

"And so began the next grand adventure of the groveling Dark Lord, his head bowed in supplication to his two true masters…" Jerry began in a singsong voice.

"The mighty Frank and the beautiful and imposing Riley," Riley offered with a chuckle. "I could really get behind this ballad idea."

Jason couldn't help but smile as the group's conversation devolved into friendly banter. Yet his gaze soon returned to the map projected across the table, his thoughts on the quest prompt. He suspected that there would be more to this quest than merely collecting a series of ingredients. What would they do once they had retrieved all of the items? And, assuming this quest would change his race, what would that actually entail? From what he could tell, the Keepers held a special place within undead society, acting as a combination of priest and ruler.

His gaze shifted back to his friends. At least he wouldn't have

to tackle these questions alone. He had Frank and Riley and the rest of the Shadow Council. Technically, he also had Alfred. Even as this thought occurred to him, he noticed the black cat's eyes focused on him. He nodded at the AI, certain he was picking up on Jason's surface thoughts.

Then Jason clapped his hands together to get the group's attention. "Okay. The first step is for me to go check on our latest batch of corpses. Then let's plan to meet at the south gate. We've got a long journey ahead of us."

Chapter 5 - Prepared

Alexion stood on a balcony on the upper levels of the keep in the Crystal Reach, his gaze drifting across the city far below. The city was ringed by a wall of milky-white crystal, a jagged, uneven ridge jutting from the top of the barrier. The buildings had also been transformed. The Roman architecture had been enhanced and accentuated, the residences now a combination of stone and crystal and the Lady's image emblazoned above each doorway – a golden figure offering a benevolent hand to a prone man. His gaze lingered on a thick trail of black smoke that marred his city, evidence that one or more buildings were ablaze. The hollow void in Alexion's head ached and throbbed, the voice in the back of his mind whispering a nearly endless litany of instructions and advice. Yet none of it helped him with his immediate problems.

"You positively reek of uncertainty," a familiar voice spoke from beside him. He turned to find the Lady standing nearby, her eyes resting on the city below.

She didn't bother to glance at him as she continued, "I expected more from you. You call yourself a warrior, and yet you haven't even managed to suppress these insolent whelps. You will not taste even the smallest drop of my true power until you have secured the Crystal Reach."

"What are you talking about?" Alexion demanded.

The Lady's golden eyes turned to him, and she sniffed contemptuously. "Do you think some glowing armor is all that I can offer you? My dear idiot knight, you have yet to experience what it really means to rule my city. Yet it doesn't matter," she added with a dismissive wave of her hand. "You are failing spectacularly."

"And what would you have me do?" he insisted, his hands clenching on the railing. "It will take time to ferret out the rest of the former soldiers and nobles, and the other travelers thrive on the chaos. We just need to be patient."

"That is not how I see it," the Lady replied, gesturing at the city. "By the time you gain control, there will be nothing left to rule." Her gazed shifted back to him. "These are merely people – each with their own motivations and goals. As any 'good' ruler will tell you, you must find what makes them tick and then twist it to your purposes."

Alexion bit back a sharp response. He knew that the Lady was right – that he was losing control and struggling to find a way to deal with the issues that plagued his city. Tamping down on the voice that whispered in the back of his mind, Alexion struggled to consider the god's words. What did the two groups want and how could he use that to his advantage?

A sizable portion of the NPCs that followed him were zealots, devoted to his cause and willing to follow him blindly if he flashed the Lady's tome before them and spouted some religious nonsense. Yet the rebellious few that still clung to the old ways shunned the Lady – that was clear from the way that her temple had languished, and her clergy had grown corrupt and fat. The rest stood somewhere in the middle, uncertain which side to choose. Perhaps he needed to give them a reason to follow him and to force the rebels out of hiding.

The players were a different problem altogether. Their motivation was clear. They wanted loot. They were also contributing to the dissension of the NPCs with their constant pillaging of the city. Unfortunately, he didn't have the in-game resources to pay Tom's group, much less to pay off the other throng of players. He could purchase items with real-world currency and then sell them in-game, but that process was slow, and the game's economy was still just getting started. He needed to find another way to satisfy their greed.

Then a germ of an idea began to worm its way into his mind. If he could somehow sate the players' appetite for loot, he could focus his full attention on solving the dissension among the NPCs. His mental wheels were turning as his impassive eyes shifted to the fields outside the city. In the distance, he could just barely make out the faint silhouettes of players traveling to and from the city along a winding, dusty road.

Alexion turned back to the Lady, his mouth opening to address her. Yet she was now gone, and he was left once again standing alone on the balcony. His lips pressed into a grim line. That's fine. He didn't need the contemptuous woman or her condescending lectures. As always, he would solve his problems himself.

* * *

"Hey, hold up!" Frank shouted from behind Jason.

He turned to find his burly friend jogging up to him, the dark keep towering in the background. Zombies and skeletons bustled around the pair within the courtyard outside the keep. The air was filled with the shouts of merchants as they manned the roughshod wooden stalls that littered the area. Meanwhile, ghostly green lanterns swayed gently on wooden posts ringing the courtyard, their eerie light filtering through the throng.

"What's up?" Jason asked, as his friend caught up with him.

"I figured I'd come with you to check out the new batch of corpses,"

Frank replied. “Without your minions, you’re easy pickings for other players. Remember you still have that pesky bounty on your head!”
Jason nodded, his eyes scanning the marketplace. He noticed quite a few human players drifting among the undead. Frank was probably right. After the incident in the dungeon north of Peccavi, he was down to only a handful of undead. He probably should have used his sway to recruit more minions from the dead instead of using *Undead Devotion*.
“Fair enough,” Jason said. “Speaking of which, I should grab some new summons from this latest shipment.”
“It might not hurt,” Frank agreed amiably. “Especially if we’re going to be making the trek to this new city. Who knows what we’re going to find in Falcon’s Hook – or on the way there.”
With that sobering thought, the pair set off through the market towards the eastern part of the city. Jerry had explained that William’s crew had dropped off the bodies near the training grounds – one of the few places inside the city large enough to house the corpses. The crowd of undead thinned out considerably as they made their way forward and soon vacant-looking wooden buildings towered on either side of them.
“So how are you holding up?” Frank asked, breaking the silence. “I meant to ask back at the keep, but it felt a little weird with everyone there.”
Jason hesitated to answer immediately, his eyes on the rough cobblestones embedded in the street. “Okay, I guess,” he finally replied. “Probably as well as can be expected under the circumstances. Honestly, I’m not really sure I want to think about it.”
“I can understand that,” Frank said, nodding and glancing at Jason with a worried expression. “I can’t even imagine what the last few days have been like for you, but maybe this quest can at least be a distraction.”
“I hope so. I could certainly use something to take my mind off of… everything,” Jason said quietly.
“Well, if you ever need someone to talk to…” Frank offered awkwardly while fiddling with the handle of one of his axes.
Jason glanced at him, trying to muster a small smile. “I appreciate it.”
The pair soon arrived at the training grounds. The space had been completely overhauled since Jason had last been there. The straw dummies were nowhere to be seen and the makeshift fence ringing the area had been removed. Undead and players now sparred in the yard with real weapons – likely a holdover from Rex’s training regime. Jason noted more than one red stain marring the dusty yard, evidence of a well-placed blow or a poorly-timed parry.
“Come on you grunts. Move faster. Jenkins, your form is terrible,” a

feminine voice shouted over the din of clashing metal. A slender form moved between the trainees, yelling reprimands and pointing out the recruits' failures. Jason didn't miss the fact that the undead and even the players straightened up as the woman passed or how their blows fell heavier and faster.

As the officer finally broke through the crowd of trainees, he saw that she wore her hair in a ponytail bound behind her head. She was also sporting heavy mail armor, a longsword swinging at her waist and her hand resting gently on the hilt. As Jason and Frank approached, her bleached eyes gave the pair a once over before immediately turning her attention back to the courtyard.

"New recruits should set up in the back," she grunted, gesturing at the far end of the training field. "Grab a weapon from the barrels and start swinging with the other idiots. You won't be coddled here. If you bleed, bandage your own wound. If you show some promise, I'll put you up against a more experienced opponent."

Jason couldn't help but smile at the jaded frustration in the woman's voice. It reminded him of the first time he had met his former general Rex. "We aren't here to train," Jason replied evenly. "We're actually here for the corpses."

The woman turned back to him, a single eyebrow raised skeptically as she re-assessed the pair. Her gaze finally settled on Jason's cloaked form, noting his slight stature and the daggers hanging at his waist. "Huh, so you must be this Jason I've heard so much about. Not really certain what I was expecting, but you are much less intimidating than the others led me to believe."

"He's really not much to look at under the hood either," Frank offered with a chuckle.

"I don't make it a habit of advertising my presence," Jason replied, glaring at Frank – who tried unsuccessfully to hide his laugh by coughing into his shoulder. "What's your name?" he asked, offering a hand to the undead woman.

"Vera Raekin," she replied, gripping his hand firmly. "Sorry about the misunderstanding. We get a constant stream of novices, fledgling travelers who have never held a blade, and the occasional bored citizen that has decided to fight for the 'glory' of the Kin. It's hard to keep track of them anymore," she muttered, shaking her head in irritation.

"Hmm. Well, your predecessor didn't have much patience for training morons either. I can appreciate the frustration, but it looks like you are doing a fine job here," he added, gesturing at the trainees.

Vera shrugged noncommittally. "I'm not sure I agree with you, they're just as pathetic as when they arrived, but I'll accept the compliment anyway." She sighed as she watched a player drop his sword by

accident. To make matters worse, his opponent failed to capitalize on the moment, tripping over his own feet as he lunged forward and landing in a heap.

"*Anyway*," Vera grumbled, "you weren't here to talk about the trainees. The corpses you are looking for are around the back of the stable. Here, let me show you," she offered, leading them toward the nearby stables.

As they circled the structure, the bodies soon came into view. The large pen behind the stable had been filled to the brim with bodies – piled two and three corpses high. The undead city didn't exactly have any horses anymore, so there was no longer any need for the pens that had once stood behind the stables. Or at least Jason assumed that must have been the thought process of whoever had dumped the corpses there.

Jason winced as the vacant gaze one of the corpses seemed to fix on him, the memory of the two teenagers flitting through his mind. He noticed Frank watching him carefully. *It's just a game*, he reminded himself. *This isn't real. These are just one more city resource – like a pile of lumber. A pile of lumber that bleeds…*

"We had them sort the bodies based on size and race. So, you'll notice a couple different piles in the pen," Vera explained, gesturing at the corpses. "We weren't quite certain how you wanted to… well… do your thing."

"This is perfect," Jason replied. "Did we get any minotaurs in this last batch?"

At Vera's confused expression, Frank spoke up. "Massive creatures. Big horns. Sort of look like humanoid cows?"

"Ahh, yes," she answered, nodding. "They brought in a few, and we dropped them in the back. They were a pain to get off the cart."

The group walked around the pen with Vera in the lead. Nearly a dozen adult minotaur corpses had been dumped along the back of the enclosure. Jason's brow furrowed in confusion. This couldn't have been all of the Minotaurs in the dungeon. Maybe William's forces had struggled to clear the first level or maybe the corpses hadn't been salvageable. He supposed it didn't matter. He would just have to work with what he had.

With a nod of thanks to Vera, he began to work. Jason's fingers twined together in an intricate pattern as dark tendrils of energy collected along his hands. The cloud cover overhead soon responded, creating a spinning vortex as forks of electricity arced between the clouds. A few seconds later, several bolts of mana-infused lightning struck the minotaurs with a deafening crash, enveloping their bodies in bright energy.

The transformation was swift. The minotaurs' rotting flesh thickened

and solidified even as stray dismembered limbs knitted themselves back together. The creatures soon twitched and jerked, adjusting to their new bodies and slowly regaining consciousness. Finally, one of the minotaurs raised itself from the ground, eyeing the pile of humanoid corpses beside it curiously. The others followed close behind.

"Hello," Jason said, moving forward and addressing the creatures. Their eyes turned to watch him impassively. He wasn't quite certain how the minotaurs would respond to his *Undead Devotion* Spell. He hadn't used it on anything other than other humans. The minotaurs were human-ish, so he was hoping this would work.

"My name is Jason, and I am the Regent of the Twilight Throne," he continued. The creatures didn't make any sign that indicated that they understood what he was saying, simply staring at him with blank expressions. It was difficult to tell whether he was getting through to them or not.

"You may feel a bit confused. You died, and I resurrected you as new citizens of my city. You will be given a place to live here, and you will be cared for. Those of you who wish to do so can work for the city. If you wish, you may leave. Just know that our neighbors will not welcome you with open arms."

"Uh, I'm not sure they understand you," Frank said softly, eyeing the creatures nervously as his hands clutched at the hilts of his axes.

The largest of the creatures suddenly stepped forward. Massive horns jutted from its forehead, and the muscles in its arms and legs rippled as it moved. Jason assumed this must be one of the bulls. The minotaur snorted roughly, bucking its head as it gazed at Jason menacingly. Without any warning, the bull dashed forward, its hooves slamming into the ground and throwing up thick clouds of dust. A bellowing roar escaped its mangled throat, echoing through the courtyard.

Before Jason could react, Frank jumped in front of him. His arms shifted and contorted, thick black hair erupting from his skin in waves as his muscles bulged grotesquely. At the same time, the bones of his fingers cracked and crunched, swiftly shortening down into massive clawed paws. Even while he was still undergoing this transformation, Frank was already sprinting forward toward the minotaur.

The pair slammed into each other with startling force. Frank slid back several feet from the impact, grunting from the strain but managing to halt the minotaur's charge. The barbarian's new bear-like arms grappled with the creature. The minotaur bellowed its defiance and slammed a meaty fist into Frank's face. His head whipped to the side with a crack, and he flew backward, his health dipping precariously.

Frank stood slowly, raising his eyes to meet the minotaur's and

wiping a trail of blood from his mouth. Thinly-veiled rage danced in the barbarian's eyes. "Is that all you have?" Frank taunted.

Then he retaliated. Frank dashed forward with surprising speed. His arm lashed out, swiping at the minotaur and his claws digging deep furrows in the creature's chest. Congealed blood dripped from the wounds, staining the minotaur's matted fur a dark maroon. The monster tried to lunge at Frank, but the barbarian danced away nimbly, putting some distance between himself and the bull.

The injury only seemed to enrage the creature further, and it charged forward again, its head lowered as though it intended to gore Frank with its horns. Jason's friend didn't give it the opportunity as he lunged to the side. Frank sailed nearly half a dozen yards before hitting the ground with a heavy thump. Jason could see that he had transformed his legs, his knees buckling at an odd angle as he assumed his familiar wolf form. His arms swiftly reverted to normal, and he grabbed at his axes.

The minotaur whirled, his eyes focusing again on Frank, but before the creature could charge once more, a blade suddenly erupted from its throat. A spray of thick blood jetted from the wound, and the bull clawed at his throat desperately as his legs buckled.

As the creature tumbled to the ground, Jason saw that Vera stood behind the minotaur. She withdrew her blade with a swift jerk, wiping the metal off on the creature's coarse hair. "Well, that was interesting," she murmured, watching the bull as its gurgling breaths slowed and then finally stopped. "I'd say he wasn't much interested in your proposal," Vera continued dryly, addressing Jason.

Jason's gaze turned to the other minotaurs standing in the pen. None of the other bulls made any move to attack. Instead, as one, they dropped their heads in submission, bowing before Jason and his teammates. That was certainly odd after the unexpected attack.

"What the hell is going on?" Frank muttered as he approached Jason, his gaze on the minotaurs and his axes still held at the ready.

"I'm not sure," Jason replied. He hadn't ever summoned this type of creature before using *Undead Devotion*. Regular humans were much easier to deal with. He had witnessed several newly-summoned humans undergo some sort of existential panic attack, but it eventually passed. However, none of the new NPCs had tried to attack him.

"These creatures look like cattle. Perhaps they also think like beasts," Vera suggested. "I expect that the bull was challenging you as alpha. Once he was slain by your 'herd,' the others submitted." The woman shrugged. "That's a guess anyway."

"That makes sense," Jason murmured. He would have to keep that in mind in the future. He should be careful about raising non-human

creatures if this was the sort of result he could expect. “Thanks for the help, Vera.” The woman nodded curtly in reply.

Then Jason’s eyes shifted back to Frank, noticing that his legs had regained their normal appearance and his leggings were unharmed by the transformation. “What was that, by the way?” he asked, gesturing at his friend’s arms. “It looked like you were part bear there for a second.”

Frank grinned broadly. “Hey, Riley isn’t the only one that had some fun while you were away. I’ve been busy. I guess you could say that I’ve learned a few new tricks.”

“I should say so,” Jason replied with a chuckle. “But the transformation doesn’t damage your gear?”

Frank nodded. “I was worried about that too. Every time I shift, my armor unequips automatically and then re-equips when I transform back. I’ve done a few experiments, and I don’t receive the stat bonuses from my equipment while shifting.”

“That’s not entirely realistic, but I suppose it makes sense,” Jason replied. If Frank’s ability destroyed his armor every time he changed shape, that would be a real pain.

It was clear that his friend had grown a lot in his absence. He could only imagine the strength boost that the bear transformation must have provided if he was able to grapple with one of the minotaurs. Only three days might have passed in the real world, but Jason kept forgetting that this was over a week in-game. He needed to make up for the lost time – and quickly.

With that thought, Jason turned back to the remaining corpses. It was time to get to work. Nearly an hour later, he had managed to raise the bodies of the dead cultists and to give a similar speech to the newly-minted undead – this time without incident. He had also used the opportunity to raise roughly twenty new zombies for his own collection. He figured that would give him a decent-sized group of minions for the journey to Falcon’s Hook. He could always add to this group over time.

Vera had quickly proven to be a competent leader, enlisting the trainees to help position the bodies so that Jason’s new citizens didn’t wake up lying on top of each other and she had assisted with coordinating the process of getting the new residents situated within the city.

“She’s not Rex, but she’s damn good at her job,” Frank commented quietly from beside Jason, his gaze resting on Vera where she stood nearby giving orders to the new recruits and NPCs.

Jason couldn’t help but agree. The soldiers under her command respected her, and she was no nonsense when it came to getting a job done. “Perhaps we’ve found someone that might be able to act as

Rex's replacement, but let's give it some more time to be certain," Jason replied. The thought of replacing his former general still stung, and he wasn't sure he was willing to act so soon. Part of him knew he was being silly, but he couldn't help it.

"By the way, I've been meaning to ask about the last batch of corpses at the end of the pen," Frank said. "They look like a bunch of wolves. If you aren't going to use them, I could consume them to level my shifting skills."

Jason's brow wrinkled in confusion, and he turned to look where Frank was pointing. Indeed, he saw that the bodies of nearly a dozen wolves had been piled in the back corner. Yet these weren't normal-looking creatures. Their bodies were massive – several times larger than the pictures Jason had seen in the real world. Their fangs were nearly as long as his forearm.

"Vera," Jason called out, trying to get the woman's attention. "Where did these wolves come from?"

"Ahh, the crew that dropped off the bodies mentioned that they had encountered a pack of the creatures on their way here. They were grumbling about needing to reinforce the caravan next time since the wolves took out a few soldiers."

"Hmm," Jason murmured. The bones of an idea were beginning to bloom in his head as he gazed at the creatures.

"I really don't like that look in your eye," Frank said. "It's that same expression you get before things start exploding or we end up taking on an entire player army. You know, just as purely *hypothetical* examples."

Jason couldn't help but laugh. "Oh come on. I'm not that bad. Besides, I think you might actually like this idea."

He turned back to Vera. "The next time William's group makes a delivery, tell them to focus on hunting the wolves. Hell, I'll give each man on the crew a gold piece for each wolf they bring back. If they manage to capture a few alive, I'll pay ten gold a head."

The officer's eyes widened. "Yes, sir. And if they ask me why they're killing the wolves?"

Jason shrugged, an excited grin creeping across his face. "Tell them that it's about time we added some cavalry to the Twilight Throne's forces."

Nearly an hour later, Jason and Frank had finished up at the training grounds and were approaching the city's southern gate. Riley soon came into sight – her slender, dark form leaning against the gate. Her eyes immediately widened as she caught sight of the pair and the assembly of creatures following behind them.

"What the hell are you riding?" she yelled at them.

Jason and Frank were each sitting atop a skeletal wolf. Jason

had ultimately decided that raising zombie wolves would make for an uncomfortable ride – what with the decaying flesh – so he had opted for skeletons.

It had only taken him a few minutes of fiddling with the control panel for his *Custom Skeleton* spell to smooth out the bones around the wolves' shoulders and the arch of their spine to create a makeshift bone saddle. The creatures each counted as two summons toward his Control Limit, but that seemed like a worthwhile tradeoff. The ride was a bit bumpy, but it was a great deal faster than running.

The difficulty was that he didn't have very many of the wolves – especially after he had given a few to Frank to consume. He had also raised nearly twenty of the cultist zombies as additional minions. This had forced him to double up the cultists on each of the spare wolves. He glanced behind him at his minions. They didn't look particularly comfortable, but it would let them keep up on the trip to Falcon's Hook.

"What? You don't like my new mount?" Frank asked Riley with a shit-eating grin.

"Uh, sure. What I mean is… where did you find a bunch of enormous wolves?" Riley retorted, circling Frank and inspecting his new mount, her hand running down its ribs.

"Apparently, one of William's delivery crews ran into a pack on their way here with the last load of corpses. We sort of repurposed them," Jason explained.

"And I'm sure you also caused a huge scene riding through the city," she replied, shaking her head. "Won't we have an army of players following us at this rate?"

"Jason thought of that," Frank jumped in. "We sent a decoy force to the northern gate to draw away anyone that might be watching us. We then circled back through the southern part of the city with the rest of the crew."

"Fine. Well, then I have just one last question," Riley said with a small smile. "Where's mine?"

"Actually, I made this one especially for you," Jason said, gesturing to one of the unoccupied wolves standing nearby. "I modified the regular bone saddle so that it's a little shorter to make it more comfortable for you and I tweaked the bones along the bottom of the ribs so that you have footholds. You'll have to test it, but my thought was that you could stand and shoot while riding – at least in theory."

Riley's smile widened as she looked at her new wolf. With a small mental nudge from Jason, the creature gently rubbed his skeletal head against Riley's shoulder. "Ahh, she's sort of cute – you know, for a dead skeleton wolf. I think I'll name her Lucy."

"I'm glad you approve," Jason replied with a smile of his own.

“Let’s hit the road!” Frank urged them, starting toward the gate. “We’ve got a long way to go, and we’re burning daylight, or… err… eternal darkness,” he amended, glancing at the ever-present dark cloud cover that hovered over the city.

Jason chuckled at Frank’s attempt at a joke as he watched Riley pet her new mount. He hadn’t realized until now how much he had missed his friends over the last few days. Maybe he could find some solace during their quest – or at least something to distract him from the painful memories that continuously threatened to bubble to the surface. He sure hoped so.

Chapter 6 - Crumbling

A loud crack could be heard as the floor of the wooden platform gave way. The man that had been standing on the structure gave an audible gasp before plunging downward. His fall was abruptly halted by the noose bound around his neck. His head jerked at an odd angle, another more muted cracking sound accompanying the blow.

Alexion watched as the latest batch of rebels was strung up and hung in the marketplace of the Crystal Reach. A crowd of NPCs had gathered around to watch, and he noted the mixture of anger and fear in their eyes.

"I see you've been busy," Tom observed as he approached Alexion. He spared an insolent wink for Caerus who stood beside Alexion.

"I hear you have been as well," Alexion retorted, noting the fresh blood staining the player's armor. His eyes also lingered on the new guild tag that now hung over Tom's head – indicating that he was a member of <Trinity>. He knew that a similar tag now hovered above his own head as well – which was to be expected of his status as the new guild leader.

"How has our new project been going?" Alexion asked, turning his gaze back to the gallows.

"As you suggested, we secured the more popular farming areas outside of town. A few players gave us some trouble over the new fee, but we made an 'example' of them," Tom replied with a dark chuckle. "We're taking the job of watching the fields in shifts. It seems this is an attractive way to make money and the new guild's ranks have been growing."

"Fantastic," Alexion said. His new plan was working nicely. He had formed a new guild, enlisting his groupies to secure the hunting grounds outside the city and tax the other players for their use. He had effectively killed two birds with one stone. This brought in much-needed tax revenue, and it allowed him to pay the players under his employ. As a result, the looting and pillaging inside the Crystal Reach had dropped off significantly.

His thoughts were interrupted as his soldiers led a woman to the gallows, her head covered in a coarse woolen bag. The cloth only barely muffled the sound of the woman's sobbing. Alexion knew from personal experience what it felt like to be led onto the platform – blind and uncertain – yet he felt no sympathy for her plight. She shouldn't have harbored fugitives.

Tom eyed the scene distastefully. "Well, I'll leave you to it. Message me if something comes up." With that, the player turned and walked away quickly.

"I see that the other travelers have a weak stomach for this type of work," Caerus observed as he watched Tom walk away.

"They don't understand the larger picture," Alexion replied, watching

impassively as the floor dropped out from under the woman and her body twitched helplessly at the end of the noose.

"Certainly. However, we have still been struggling to ferret out the remaining rebels," Caerus said. His gaze shifted to the nearby townspeople who had gathered to watch the hangings. "This sort of display helps discourage unsavory activity, but it also solidifies a faction of the city against our cause."

Alexion could feel the condescension in the man's voice, and the whisper in the back of his mind railed against his implied weakness. "I know that," Alexion spat. "What is your point?"

"Of course, sir," Caerus said, bowing his head demurely. "Fear is always a powerful motivator, but there are other ways to… incentivize people. For example, the desecration of the Lady's temple was a powerful source of 'inspiration' for your followers. One might even say that it was rather convenient that the Twilight Throne acted when they did."

Alexion turned to look at the older man, noticing the malicious gleam in his eye and catching the implication behind his words. "Out with it, Caerus. You clearly have an idea, so just get to it."

"Perhaps we can do something similar – provide the people with a common enemy. Someone to hate besides us. If we're able to unite them behind a single foe, then they would be less likely to undermine our efforts and harbor these fugitives. I have heard that one of the guilds in the mage city south of the Twilight Throne has begun purchasing undead slaves. With a few of those undead, we could possibly persuade our people to cooperate."

Alexion mulled on this information. He had also heard of the recent events in Vaerwald and had watched a few clips online. A magical plague had nearly broken out within the city and had been stopped by someone using dark magic. The Dark One had also made a surprise appearance in the courtyard of the Great Library. With Jason out of commission in the real world, Alexion suspected one of his two friends had been involved. The insidious voice in the back of his mind raged at the thought that Riley might have somehow been responsible.

Yet that thought gave him pause and he clamped down on the malignant whisper, turning back to Caerus. "Or perhaps you're thinking too small Caerus. Get in contact with this guild in Vaerwald that is purchasing undead slaves. I think it's time that I met with its leader."

* * *

With their new mounts, the group made great time. The skeletal wolves had nearly infinite stamina, which allowed them to maintain a

continuous loping gait. It was actually rather surprising how much distance they had put behind them in less than half a day in-game – although that might have been due in part to the relentless pace Jason had set. He felt compelled to catch up on the time he had lost in the real world.

The impenetrable darkness that hung over the Twilight Throne had quickly given way to bright sunlight, the rays struggling to penetrate the dense forest cover. As they continued further east, the road had soon hit the ocean and veered sharply south, tracing a path along the coast. The forest and flatlands around the undead city had disappeared, and now craggy bluffs hung on either side of the group. A stiff wind rushed down between the canyon walls, carrying the faint hint of salt on the air.

The group had encountered few players or NPCs on the road. Jason supposed that most of the tourists that visited the Twilight Throne must travel from the larger cities to the south and west. The lack of established trade channels with other neighboring kingdoms probably explained the sparse foot traffic as well. He would need to deal with that problem eventually.

"This sure beats running," Frank said, stretching his arms over his head lazily as his skeletal wolf raced forward.

"You also have to love that there is no such thing as sore muscles or blisters in this game," Riley added. "At least not yet, anyway. I've ridden a few real horses, and I bet we would be dying by now if this was real."

Jason couldn't help but agree. "I can definitely live with a couple of unrealistic features," he replied before glancing over his shoulder. His undead minions trailed along behind them, sunlight shining down on their cloaked forms. "Speaking of which, I could really do without the undead decay," he muttered.

"Yeah, they do seem to be looking a little worse for wear," Frank replied, watching Jason's minions with a slightly disgusted look on his face.

That might have been an understatement. Jason had robed all of the cultist zombies in rough cloaks – which reduced the decay. However, this merely *slowed* the process, and there was no way to completely shield the wolves. The zombies' flesh had already begun to deteriorate, rotten chunks occasionally sloughing off the zombies and dropping onto the roadway with a wet thud. Jason had also detected hairline fractures along the skeletal bodies of their new mounts.

A glance at his summon information window had confirmed that the undead were all afflicted by a debuff – a timer counting down in the window's margin. The debuff decreased his minions' total health by a growing percentage. He only had about two days before

each summon entirely decayed and fell apart. Although, he figured he might be able to slow the process further if he began traveling at night and hiding his minions underground during the day.

"If we could beef up the ranks of our new guild, maybe we could get some players on our team," Frank continued, still eyeing the undead. "That could be sort of useful when we need to venture outside the Twilight Throne's area of influence."

"Vetting them is going to be a problem, though," Riley muttered. "Have you talked to some of those people that have shown up in the Twilight Throne? They're an odd group."

"Well, I can deal with *odd*," Frank replied. "I've only spoken to a handful of people so far, but, from what I could tell, they were also a bit hesitant to join the guild. That's a bigger problem. Despite recent events, it's as though everyone is waiting to see if Jason can keep his city before they commit."

Jason's burly friend lapsed into silence for a moment. His eyes darted to Jason and then back to the ravine they were traveling through. "You both are probably not going to like this idea, but there might be one way we could grow our ranks quickly."

Jason raised an eyebrow. "I can only imagine what you're going to say next. Should I brace myself or something?" he joked.

Frank's lips widened into a grin. "Probably." He took a deep breath before continuing, "We could release the fact that you… umm… *took out* those two intruders in the real world." He put up his hands defensively at Jason and Riley's scowling expressions. "I'm just saying we could maybe hint that the real-life Jason and the leader of the Twilight Throne are the same person."

"That is a truly terrible idea," Riley said, glaring at Frank. Jason also noted that Alfred was watching Frank closely from where he was perched on the front of Jason's mount. His expression looked anxious.

As his two friends began bickering, Jason stayed silent. He could understand Frank's reasoning. If the players in-game knew or suspected that he had killed the two teenagers in the real world, that would certainly increase his "evil street cred." However, George's warning and his conversation with Alfred still lingered in the back of his mind. The real-world blowback would almost certainly outweigh the in-game benefits.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Jason said quietly, interrupting his friends. "We still don't know why I was attacked – or who was ultimately responsible. The detective thought there might be more to the story than just a simple breakin. We also don't know how revealing my identity might affect the investigation. You all heard Florius' rant. How long do you think it would take before people

started claiming I killed those two teenagers in cold blood?"

"All good points," Riley offered, still glaring daggers at Frank.

The burly barbarian shrugged. "It was just an idea. I'm not dead set on it or anything, but it would be great publicity for Original Sin."

The group quieted and came to an abrupt stop as they saw one of their scouts approaching from the front of the column. The undead was riding his own wolf mount and was acting as the group's vanguard – with instructions to identify any threats coming from farther down the road and report back to Jason.

"Master," the creature croaked as it neared. "There are several travelers up ahead. Five by my count. They have stopped to make camp."

"Can we go around them?" Jason asked. His goals were two-fold: travel as quickly as possible and avoid detection. If any players caught wind of his quest or his group's location, he suspected they would constantly be on the run.

The zombie shook his head, the gesture jerky and uncoordinated. "The ravine continues for some distance, and I did not see an alternate path."

Riley inspected the stone walls looming on either side of the road. The nearest cliff face was roughly sixty feet tall, the surface dotted with loose rocks and vines. "We could probably scale the cliff, but the wolves would have trouble. We could also circle back and find an easier place to climb up," she suggested. Her hands darted through the air, bringing up her map. "Hmm, but that'll cost us a few hours at least."

"We can't afford the delay," Jason murmured, his gaze resting on his undead again. They wouldn't just lose a few hours – his minions would also continue to deteriorate.

"Did you manage to determine the travelers' levels?" Jason asked his zombie.

"No, master," his minion replied.

Frank glanced at Jason in surprise. "Are you thinking of killing them?"

Jason bit his lip. A preemptive strike was likely their best strategy, despite his own hang-ups. "I'm not sure we have much choice. We can't afford to wait, we can't just leave the undead here, and we can't afford to let them see us."

He sighed. "We'll need to take them out quickly. We can't afford to be identified – they might alert other players that we are near Falcon's Hook. That means we also can't let them see the wolves or the other undead."

Jason's gaze shifted to the cliff face beside him. His *Perception*

skill automatically identified foot and handholds on the surface. Riley was right. They could probably scale the wall and attack from the ridgeline. This would at least give them the element of surprise.

Riley was following his gaze and seemed to pick up on his plan. "If we attack from the cliff, that would put us above them. I might be able to pick off at least one before they noticed they were under fire."

Frank was nodding along as he listened to the two of them. "We also passed a shady part of the ravine a mile or so back. We could position your other undead there so they will be out of sight."

Jason mulled over the tentative plan but couldn't see any way to improve upon it. "That's probably our best strategy under the circumstances. Riley, why don't you scale this cliff first since you have the highest *Dexterity*. I think I have some spare rope in my pack," he added, rummaging in his bag before finding the coiled material.

Without waiting for further instructions, Riley headed for the cliff face. She quickened her pace as she approached, beginning a light jog before leaping forward and catching a handhold. Jason shook his head as he watched how quickly she scaled the rough surface. It was at times like this that he regretted investing all of his points in *Willpower*.

Jason turned his attention back to the undead. With a quick mental order, he grouped the wolves and cultist zombies and ordered them to return to the shadowy portion of the ravine farther back along the road. He quickly gave them a few instructions – ensuring that they wouldn't merely stand there dumbly if they were attacked while he was gone. As he finished giving his orders, the group turned and began traveling back along the road in the direction they had just come.

With his undead secure, Frank and Jason made their way to the cliff face. Riley now stood far above them. She tossed down the rope, one end presumably anchored to something out of sight at the top of the bluff. Jason looked up at her and sighed. He wouldn't have tried to attempt something this stupid in the real world.

"After you," Frank said, eyeing the rope skeptically.

"Wimp," Jason muttered.

A few minutes later, the pair had crested the top of the ridge. Jason took a moment to look around. In contrast to the ravine below, his view of the area was now unobstructed. Puffy white clouds drifted slowly through the sky. On the other side of the gorge, an endless blue expanse of water stretched out toward the horizon, sunlight shimmering over the water.

"Great view, huh?" Riley commented with a smile.

"Definitely," Jason replied. After the gloomy surroundings of the Twilight Throne, it was interesting to explore other parts of the

game world.

The view was lost on Frank. The barbarian peered back over the edge of the cliff, noting the sharp drop down to the ravine below. He backed away slowly, looking a little green. “You guys are nuts. I hate heights.”

“It’ll be fine,” Jason assured his friend, patting him on the back. “Just remember you can’t really die in-game. Let’s move forward quickly and quietly. We want to catch these guys off guard before they decide to break camp.”

His friends nodded, and they crept along the ridge. Riley immediately disappeared, dropping into *Sneak* and staying close to the edge in order to catch sight of the travelers below them. After a few minutes, she abruptly reappeared beside them.

“What the hell…?” Frank began, jumping slightly.

Riley clamped a hand over his mouth. Her hood drifted back slightly, and Jason could see that she was channeling her dark mana – her eyes a solid obsidian. “Shut up,” she said bluntly. “The players are just below us.” Riley padded back toward the edge of the cliff, motioning for Jason to follow. Frank just crossed his arms, clearly not planning to get that close to the ledge.

As Jason inched forward and peered over the edge, he could see five players far below them. They appeared to be lounging around a makeshift campfire. A dark tunnel was carved into the cliff nearby. Perhaps this was some sort of minor dungeon. He saw that two of the players were wearing brightly-colored robes, one wore heavy mail armor, and the other two were dressed in thick leathers, daggers swinging at their waists.

“Two mages, a fighter, and two rogues?” Riley whispered from beside Jason.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” he replied quietly. “The priority should be the mages.” He eyed a bow leaning against the wall of the ravine near one of the rogues. “Then the player with the bow. Let’s move a bit further back and regroup with Frank.”

The pair inched away from the ledge and stepped back toward Frank where he stood waiting for them. “Okay. What’s the game plan?” the barbarian asked.

Jason took a seat on a nearby boulder, drumming his fingers against the stone as he considered how to approach this fight. Neither he nor Frank had a ranged attack. Jason could slow the players using *Curse of Weakness*, but they would be relying almost entirely on Riley to fight for them. There was also that dark tunnel in the side of the cliff. If they didn’t kill the players quickly, they would likely flee into the cave – which meant chasing them through some sort of unmapped cavern.

We need a way to take them out all at once, he thought.

Then Jason's gaze rested on the stone he was sitting upon and drifted to the ridge nearby. Debris and rubble stood along the cliff face, several large boulders overhanging the edge of the ridge. A glimmer of an idea flitted through his mind.

"God, I hate that expression," Frank muttered, watching Jason closely. "You get that exact same look just before something crazy happens."

Jason chuckled slightly. "This one isn't that crazy, I promise. There are a bunch of boulders and other rocks up here," he offered, gesturing at the rocks that lined the ledge. "What if we caved in a part of the cliff?"

"Sure… but how?" Riley asked skeptically.

Jason rose and patted Frank on the shoulder. "We have our awesome shapeshifting warrior friend here. I'm sure his axes could carve a decent chunk out of the side of the cliff face."

Frank just stared at him. "Except for the part where I might also fall over the edge."

"You worry too much. I'm sure it'll be fine," Jason said, waving away his objection.

"You say that, but I don't really believe you." When the barbarian saw that his two friends were not going to back down, he grumbled, "Fine. Fine! But you two are going to owe me for this." With that, Frank reluctantly unstrapped the axes from the loops at his waist and moved tentatively toward the edge of the cliff.

Meanwhile, Riley and Jason took up a position a bit further down the ledge. Riley nocked an arrow and sighted down into the ravine. Jason's job would be to cast *Curse of Weakness* on the players as the debris fell down around them.

As they took up their positions, Jason caught sight of the players again. They sat around the campfire speaking amiably and joking, their voices echoing through the canyon. He felt a sense of guilt wash over him as he watched them. In the past, he had always felt justified in attacking other players and NPCs – most often because they were trying to kill him. However, this time, he was the one striking first.

Then his thoughts drifted back to his previous conversations with Alfred, his eyes darting to the AI where he stood nearby, watching them impassively. The AI clearly intended for him to be this game's villain and a lot was now riding on his progress in-game. He couldn't afford to hesitate. He needed to accept his role and everything that it entailed.

Jason swiftly summoned his dark mana. The frigid power raced through his veins, blunting his anxiety and suppressing his guilt. His

focus honed to a fine point – his gaze riveted on the players below him. This was his element.

He gestured to Frank, signaling for him to begin the attack. His friend nodded quietly in acknowledgment before his arms began to ripple and shift, his muscles bulging and thick hair sprouting from his skin. Within seconds, his furry bear arms were back, his clawed fingers straining awkwardly around the shafts of his axes.

Frank craned his head to the sky, beginning to channel *Rage of the Herd* in order to give himself and Riley another small damage boost. Frank's mouth opened to release a roar of rage, but no sound escaped his lips. The barbarian's red, rage-filled eyes snapped open in surprise, seeing the sharp black needle of energy embedded in his arm – a product of Jason's *Curse of Silence*. A delighted, manic smile curled Frank's lips.

With a massive heave, the barbarian raised his axes simultaneously and then slammed them into the ground, throwing up a thick cloud of dust and debris. The blades carved considerable chunks out of the rock, but the blows weren't quite enough to cave-in the side of the cliff. This didn't deter Frank. His blades crashed into the stone and dirt over and over again, his form soon obscured by the thick cloud of dust that now floated through the air.

Meanwhile, Riley and Jason launched into action. One of the mages in the ravine below glanced up at the noise along the edge of the cliff, his mouth opening to warn his friends. A sharp needle of energy punctured his skin as Jason completed another *Curse of Silence*. A moment later, a black shaft embedded itself in the mage's eye, blood gushing from the wound as he crumpled to the ground.

It took the player's friends a few precious seconds to notice his death. That delay cost them dearly. Just as they were rising to their feet and their eyes moved to the ridgeline, Frank slammed his axes one final time into the ground. The stone and dirt began to give way, a thundering roar echoing through the ravine as chunks of rock hurtled downward toward the players.

As the remainder of the group turned to flee, Jason's hands danced through the motions of *Curse of Weakness*, and black energy began to curl and coil along his hands. A barrage of missiles soon raced away from him, hurtling past the debris and puncturing the skin and armor of the fleeing players. Their movements slowed considerably, appearing as though they were running in slow motion toward the entrance of the cave as the cliff collapsed.

A few seconds later, the wave of rock and dirt crashed onto the players, burying them beneath the rubble and obscuring the bottom of the ravine under a massive cloud of dust. Notifications flashed in Jason's peripheral vision, and he glanced at his combat log anxiously.

He breathed an immediate sigh of relief as he saw confirmation of four more player kills.

"Well, that worked pretty well," Riley murmured, eyeing the floor of the ravine.

"Yeah, that wasn't so bad," Frank agreed, approaching slowly as his arms rippled and transformed back to normal.

Jason turned back to Frank, opening his mouth to taunt his friend about not trusting him. Then he froze, his eyes widening as he noticed a huge shadow on the ground around Frank. Before he could warn his friend, the barbarian was slammed into the ground and foot-long talons curled around its body. A massive eagle rested atop Frank. It craned its neck into the air and released a piercing shriek. A quick inspection revealed the following.

Lesser Roc – Level 164

Riley shook off her shock immediately. She raced forward, her daggers appearing in her hands in a flash of movement. She stabbed at the massive bird, blood soon drenching its feathers. It let out another wail as its expansive wings swept forward, the air buffeting Riley's body and throwing her backward. Jason was also caught in the gust, the torrent of wind knocking him back against a boulder as he struggled to regain his feet.

Frank wriggled under the creature, his body momentarily freed as the Roc shifted its attention to Riley. He had accidentally dropped his axes during the surprise attack and his arms contorted – retaking their bear-like appearance. As the transformation completed, Frank released a bellowing roar. His clawed hands scraped against the bird's talons leaving long bloody gashes in its rough skin. With one final attack, Frank slammed his paw into the Roc's leg. With a sickening crunch, he snapped the bird's leg like a twig.

The Roc lurched to the side, blood pouring from its wounds and staining the ground. It turned crazed eyes to look at its former prey. Its beak snapped forward, burrowing into the dirt as Frank rolled out of the way. The Roc lunged again, but this time Frank was too slow. Its beak penetrated his shoulder as the barbarian screamed in pain. Jason could see Frank's health dip sharply. He couldn't hold out for much longer, and Riley was still recovering from the Roc's counter attack.

Jason's mind whirled as he tried to think of a way to help his friend. His eyes darted frantically to the bottom of the ravine, noting the bodies of the players. With a quick series of gestures, their bodies exploded in a shower of blood and debris. Their bones raced through the air toward Jason and formed a series of bone shields around him.

As the Roc lunged toward Frank again, and Riley struggled to regain her feet, Jason mentally directed one of the bone shields forward. It shot through the air, just barely intercepting the Roc's beak as it made another strike. Fragments of bones shot in every direction as the disc exploded. Then a stream of red energy lanced through the air, coating Frank's body. The tears in his flesh began to heal rapidly, his skin knitting itself together.

Jason looked toward the source of the crimson energy and found Riley standing nearby. Her hands were pointed toward Frank, a blood-red mist swirling around her open palms and streaming toward the barbarian. Yet it was her eyes that captured Jason's attention. Riley's irises were the usual unholy obsidian – but now red streaks lanced away from her pupils like malignant vines.

As he began to recover, Frank roared in rage. His paws clawed frantically at the Roc, leaving large gouges in the bird's skin. Then, with a final massive heave, Frank shoved the creature off of him and scrambled to his feet. The Roc regained its composure quickly, shifting awkwardly on its good leg as it turned back to Frank.

The barbarian didn't hesitate. He sprinted forward toward the creature, leaping the final few feet. He swatted aside the Roc's beak with a bone-crunching blow, before burrowing his claws into its neck. Crimson blood gushed from the bird's new wounds, and it let out another strangled cry as its strength began to leave its body. Unfortunately, Frank hadn't taken in account the momentum of his charge. As he grappled with the creature, the pair slowly teetered toward the edge of the cliff.

"Frank!" Jason and Riley both shouted in warning.

But it was too late. Frank and the Roc toppled over the ledge, hurtling the sixty feet to the ground below. They landed with a thunderous crash. Riley and Jason raced to the edge of the cliff, peering over the ledge and trying to catch sight of their friend through the cloud of dust that drifted through the bottom of the ravine.

After a few painstaking moments, the debris began to clear, and they heard a groan. Frank stood atop the Roc, his chest heaving, and his fur-covered arms stained red with the bird's blood. His eyes shifted up to the edge of the ridge. "See?" he shouted, pointing at the dead Roc. "I told you I was going to fall over the damn ledge!"

Chapter 7 - Treacherous

Claire sat in a lumpy chair, the cloth upholstery stained by some unknown substance. The contrast between Cerillion Entertainment headquarters and the CPSC offices was striking, and she couldn't help but feel a little spoiled as she examined the dilapidated waiting room on an upper floor of the governmental building. Her eyes lingered on a stain on her chair, her hands clenching and twining together – evidence of her poorly concealed anxiety.

"Ms. Thompson." Claire glanced up to find the receptionist nearby staring at her, the woman's expression hard. "Ms. Bastion will see you now." The woman gestured at a wooden door nearby.

Claire swallowed hard and stood, forcing herself to put one foot in front of the other as she approached the door. The weight of her decision settled on her shoulders. There wouldn't be any turning back from this. Taking a deep breath, Claire opened the door and stepped inside.

Gloria Bastion's office was not much to look at. The aged woman sat at an ancient wooden desk that had been crammed into a space that felt just slightly too small. Bookshelves lined the walls, their shelves covered in three-ring binders and manuals. Claire idly wondered what type of person still used print books and papers in this day and age.

"Ms. Thompson," Gloria greeted her, not bothering to stand. Her eyes stayed fixed on the screen that hovered above her desk. "To what do I owe this visit? Has your employer found another way to twist the knife or should I expect another sloppy excuse for why our game masters do not have any administrative control over this game?"

Claire took a seat opposite Gloria's desk, forcing herself to relax her hands. "Actually, I'm not here on official company business. I wanted to speak with you privately.

This caught the older woman's attention, and her eyes snapped to Claire. "Oh, really? And what would you like to discuss?"

On the drive over, and while she was waiting in the lobby, Claire had given some thought to how she wanted to broach this topic. Despite her decision to do this, she still felt her stomach gurgle, and bile lingered at the back of her throat. "I wanted to discuss the game," she began softly. "I have reason to believe that the AI controller that services the game world may have overstepped his directives."

Gloria swiped away her screen, her focus now riveted on Claire. "Okay, you have my attention. What exactly makes you think that the AI controller has gone rogue?"

"Since the game launch, I have noticed that the AI – who I call Alfred – has begun accessing player memories." Claire was careful not to

mention Robert's involvement, and she had decided to hedge on exactly when she had discovered this issue.

"We observed something similar during testing, and it was covered under the scope of our examination," Gloria replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I'm not sure that warrants a personal visit."

"Yes, of course." Claire nodded quickly. "However, the brain activity of the players during some of these episodes is off the charts." She tapped at her Core, projecting an image of Jason's neural activity into the air – his identifying information having been carefully redacted. Gloria watched the data uncertainly.

With a cough, Claire urged herself to get to the punch line. "Based… based on this latest incident as an example, I believe that Alfred may be taking control of the players."

Gloria's eyes widened in surprise. "That's a big accusation. Why are you coming to me instead of talking to George?"

"My employer doesn't believe that this information presents a problem, but I couldn't stand by if the AI controller is somehow harming the players," Claire replied, her eyes drifting to the desk. "My loyalty to the company aside, this represents a major risk to the players, and it needs to be investigated."

Gloria watched her appraisingly. "Hmm. Well, do you have any evidence other than the unusual brain activity of a single player? It's suspicious, but I doubt my superiors will take this seriously unless I have more compelling evidence."

Claire bit her lip, her thoughts immediately turning to Jason. Could she really prove that Alfred had taken over his body? That the AI might have killed those two teenagers that broke into his home? All signs pointed in that direction. Yet, at the same time, her evidence was still only circumstantial. If she dropped Jason's name without real proof, she might be causing him a lot of heartache.

"I think I might be able to find more evidence," Claire said softly.

A small smile crept across Gloria's severe face. "Good. I would be interested to hear more. I also look forward to working together, Ms. Thompson." She stood and offered a hand.

Claire stared at the woman's open palm for a long moment. Reluctantly, she reached forward and accepted Gloria's hand. The older woman's eyes bore into her, glinting with poorly concealed excitement. Claire would have to live with the consequences of her decision.

There was no going back now.

* * *

“For the last time, I’m not responsible for us getting attacked by a giant eagle or for you falling over the ledge,” Jason said to Frank as he stepped gingerly around the rubble that now lined the bottom of the ravine.

“You say that, but I was totally right,” his friend muttered.

The group stood at the bottom of the canyon. Riley and Jason had vacated the ridge quickly after they realized that there might be more of the Rocs nearby. They were easy pickings out in the open at the top of the ridge, but the narrow walls of the ravine made another attack less likely.

“This thing is enormous. It must have a fifteen-foot wingspan,” Riley spoke up, eyeing the corpse of the Roc. The bird’s body hadn’t fared well when it hit the ground. Many of the bones in its wings and torso had been broken, and crimson blood now stained the boulders that rested at the bottom of the ravine.

“You know, as payment for almost getting me killed, you could give me the corpse,” Frank suggested, an excited grin curling his lips.

Jason stared morosely at the body. He *could* give it to Frank, or he could raise some sort of flying skeletal monstrosity. It was a difficult choice. “Fine. Fine. You can have it,” Jason muttered. “I’ll do anything if it will make you shut up.”

Frank’s grin widened into a gleeful smile. He glanced at Riley. “See? You just have to wear him down.” This earned him a chuckle from Riley.

The barbarian approached the body, resting his hand on the Roc’s torso. Before Jason and Riley could ask him what he was doing, his hands rippled and transformed back into claws, and he tore into the bird’s skin. Blood gushed from the wound, staining Frank’s arms. With a final massive heave, the barbarian ripped something from the Roc’s chest.

Jason could see that his friend now held the bird’s heart in his hand, the organ nearly the size of a human head and purple veins riddling the flesh. Frank took a deep breath before closing his eyes and taking a huge bite out of the fleshy heart. Riley and Jason recoiled in horror, disgusted looks on their faces as they saw the bird’s blood run down Frank’s chin.

Then the massive eagle’s body began to twitch and shake. Multicolored streamers of energy coiled around its torso and wings, swiftly disintegrating its feathers, skin, muscles, and bones in layers. The energy streaked toward Frank’s hand – coiling up his arm and his body before rushing into his open mouth. His eyes shifted through a kaleidoscope of colors, and he groaned under the strain of channeling the energy.

After only a few moments, there was little left of the Roc other than

bloodstained rocks. “Is that how you consume a creature?” Jason asked quietly, a mixture of disgust and curiosity tingeing his voice. “I thought you didn’t have to eat it.” Looking back on it, Frank had always been rather *secretive* when he consumed an animal.

The barbarian had slumped to the ground, and his eyes were distant, reviewing some notification Jason couldn’t see. He shook himself and turned to Jason. “Basically. Also, I might have lied about that part. I wasn’t looking forward to the expression you all are wearing right now.”

“You mean disgust?” Riley asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Exactly,” Frank replied. “Anyway, it took some practice to get the hang of it. Every time I consume an animal-type monster I receive a random shapeshifting ability related to that animal. The stat bonuses from the transformation also increase as I consume more of the same type of creature.”

“I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t make it very far with your class,” Riley replied with a shake of her head.

Frank nodded in understanding. “It isn’t as bad as it looks. The game mutes your sense of taste, so it’s easier if you just don’t look at what you’re eating.”

“I just don’t think I could do it,” Riley murmured. Jason couldn’t help but agree, but he supposed raising decaying, undead minions using the dismembered corpses of his enemies wasn’t much better.

“So what shapeshifting ability did you get that time?” Riley asked Frank. “Let me guess. Bird legs. You’ll be our little chicken barbarian.”

Frank glared at her. “Actually, I managed to get the wings thank you very much. It looks like the shift offers flight for a brief period.” He whistled as he reviewed a set of invisible notifications. “50 stamina per second? I won’t be able to keep that up for very long.”

“At least we can push you over ledges without having to listen to you complain now,” Jason said, slapping Frank on the back. This earned him a pained grimace from his burly friend.

Jason shifted his attention to Riley as she picked through the rubble and tried to loot the fallen players – their bodies crushed by the massive blocks of stone. “You have some explaining to do yourself. What was that red energy you were channeling?” he inquired, curiosity tingeing his voice. “I didn’t realize you had a new healing spell.”

Riley glanced at him as she lifted a rock and threw it aside, revealing the corpse of one of the player mages. She plucked distastefully at the man’s belt, retrieving a pouch. “Well, you

remember that I mentioned visiting Vaerwald south of the Twilight Throne? I ended up completing the quest for my bow – which unlocked its special ability and granted me a new class."

"That's news to me!" Frank said in an accusing tone.

Riley shrugged. "I guess it just didn't come up."

"So, what's your new class?" Jason asked.

"I'm now a Fury," Riley explained. "It's apparently a hidden class and allows me to manipulate my own blood. I basically gained a health-drain and a health-transfer ability. On top of that, my spells now cost health to cast, and my mana pool was added to health."

Jason's eyes widened in shock. That was a pretty dramatic change. It essentially meant that Riley had been converted into some sort of support-assassin hybrid. Assuming she could keep her health drain up on a few targets, she could now provide spot healing for Jason and Frank at a distance. That was on top of her standard *Blood Mist* spell.

Frank snorted. "And here I only got some silly wings. Speaking of which, you want to see them?"

"Definitely," Jason replied, turning back to his friend.

Fleshy tendrils suddenly erupted from Frank's shoulder blades, splitting his skin and racing into the air. Feathers began sprouting from the growths, and the wings rapidly filled out. Frank's body contorted, and he hunched over in pain as a groan escaped his lips. After only a few seconds, he straightened, extending his new wings and giving them an experimental flap. Air rushed through the ravine, blowing dust toward Jason and Riley.

"Impressive," Jason said, covering his face with the edge of his cloak. "But can you actually take off?"

"I guess…" Frank replied uncertainly, rolling his shoulders. "Damn the shift hurts the first time. Now let's see if I can fly with these bad boys."

The barbarian scrunched his face up, appearing to concentrate on lifting off. The wings beat in an unsteady rhythm, but after a few moments he figured out how to beat them in a rhythm, and he rose shakily from the ground. He drifted nearly twenty feet into the air, his expression triumphant.

Then Frank made the mistake of looking down, and he suddenly realized that the ground was shrinking below him. A look of panic flitted across his face, the cadence of his wings shifting awkwardly. He began listing to the side, and a wing scraped against the wall of the ravine, throwing him completely off balance. He promptly tumbled to the ground, landing heavily in a heap of feathers.

Riley was laughing hard, leaning against the wall of the ravine to support herself. "I think you might need some practice," she

managed to say between gasping breaths.

Jason couldn't help but smile as Frank pushed himself from the ground – the wings suddenly shuddering and shrinking as the shift ended. "It's harder than it looks," he muttered.

"Sure it is, killer," Riley replied, still laughing.

"*Anyway*, what's our next step?" Frank asked, trying to change the subject as he regained his feet and rubbed at his shoulders.

Jason tapped his lips with his fingers as he pondered this question. The presence of the players indicated that they were getting close to a populated area. A glance at his map confirmed that they were only a few miles away from Falcon's Hook. He had sent a mental message to his undead as they made their way down to the ravine and they now stood idly around him. Their rotten flesh and bleached white bones stood out in the bright sunlight that shone down into the canyon. He wasn't certain he would be able to hide their true nature during the day. There was a limit to what a tattered cloak could conceal.

As though reading his mind, Frank spoke up, "I'm not sure we're going to be able to bring the undead with us into town."

"That's what I was just thinking," Jason replied. His gaze shifted to the cave entrance beside them. "We might have to leave them all here and come back for them later. Maybe we can leave them inside this cave?"

"It might help to scout it first," Riley suggested. "Just give me a couple minutes, and I'll be right back." With that, she started toward the cave at a light jog, activating *Sneak*. She soon disappeared inside.

"Have you noticed that Riley seems a bit different?" Frank asked, his eyes lingering on the tunnel entrance where the Fury had disappeared. "She's been a lot more assertive since she tackled her bow quest."

Jason had noticed. He couldn't quite place his finger on the change, but she did seem much more confident – like she had made peace with herself. Not for the first time, Jason wondered what exactly had happened while he had been gone.

After a few seconds passed, Jason realized he hadn't responded to Frank's question. "This game has a strange effect on people," he offered. "Or maybe she's finally getting over Alex."

"I guess so," Frank replied, shaking his head. "I need to check my notifications for a second."

Jason realized that he also had a few notifications lingering in the corner of his vision. As he focused on the prompts, a series of notifications appeared in his field of view.

x1 Level Up!
You have (5) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Mana Mastery
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: -6.0% to mana cost.
Effect 2: +1% faster casting rate.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Curse of Silence
Skill Level: Beginner Level 6
Effect: You silence your target for 5.5 seconds, preventing speech and spell casting.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Curse of Weakness
Skill Level: Beginner Level 5
Effect: Increased effect of slow and reduction to strength, dexterity, and vitality.

This wasn't a bad reward for taking out a few players and some sort of giant eagle. However, it was only minor progress. He needed to grow more quickly if he wanted to maintain his lead in-game – assuming he was even still counted among the top-level players.

Riley chose that moment to drop out of *Sneak*, interrupting his thoughts. "Find anything interesting?" Jason asked.

"Not really. There is a small group of adjoining caves inside. They are completely cleaned out. It looks like a bunch of mole creatures had taken up residence inside. Maybe the players were resting after clearing the caves."

"Here, bring up your map," Jason directed. With a quick flick of her wrist, Riley pulled up her map. "You should be able to update my map information now that I'm at Intermediate Level 1 in *Tactician*. Is there a button or something?"

"Ahh, yeah. Right here," Riley replied, tapping at the air in front of her.

As soon as she made the gesture, Jason's map began to populate with new information. It appeared that the entrance tunnel continued into the side of the cliff for some distance, heading downward at a steep angle. It eventually dead-ended into a cave complex made up of five large caverns. It was a decent-sized warren but couldn't really be considered a full-fledged dungeon.

Jason's eyes moved back to the undead milling around him. "This may be a good place to set up a base of operations. We're only an hour away from the town on foot, but this seems to be a reasonably high-

level area, so player traffic will probably be minimal."

"That seems like the best option," Riley agreed. "But what happens if players discover them while we're gone?"

"Fair point." Jason's attention shifted to the rubble littering the ravine. "Maybe they could use some of this rock to blockade the entrance during the day..." he trailed off, lost in thought.

"It's like he's going into some sort of tactical coma," Frank joked as he watched Jason.

Jason ignored the teasing, focusing on issuing a set of commands for his undead. They immediately began moving. The skeletal wolves trotted into the cave and took up residence inside. Riley spared a parting pat on Lucy's nose before the wolf took off for the cave. Meanwhile, the remaining cultist zombies set to work moving the rubble in front of the cave. The debris was heavy, but, working together, the cultists were able to lift and roll the rocks into position.

While his minions set to work, Jason gave some thought to their longterm situation. Riley was right. They might be camped in or around Falcon's Hook for a while, and his minions would be too far away for him to micromanage. Sighing, he began casting *Lieutenant Zombie* on one of the nearby cultists. The sustained mana cost of the spell was a burden, but he needed to leave behind at least one minion with some measure of intelligence.

"What are your orders, Master?" the zombie lieutenant croaked a moment later.

"I'm going to leave you and the skeleton wolves here for a few days," Jason began. "I want you all to stay inside the caves unless you're attacked, or there is some other emergency. Stagger the undead within the cave complex so that you can easily kill any of the mole creatures that might respawn."

"Of course, Master."

"Each night, I want you to remove the rubble from the cave entrance and go hunting. Shore up the entrance to the cavern when you leave and take the entire group with you. Kill any players and other creatures you find and bring their bodies back to this cave. Use one of the caverns in back to hold the corpses."

Jason hesitated, his eyes lingering on Frank and the massive bloodstain that still marred the floor of the canyon – the only remaining evidence of the Roc's death. "I also want you to scout the ridge along the coast. If you find the Rocs' nesting place, I want you to slay them. Don't attack if you will attract the attention of more than two of the creatures at once. You should also try to approach them at night – while they may be sleeping. Use caution. A stealthy blow is preferable to a direct confrontation."

The zombie nodded curtly and then stepped toward the cave,

swiftly taking the lead in directing the other undead cultists to barricade the entrance. “Are you sure you want them to hunt creatures on their own?” Frank asked. “What if they get wiped out?

Jason shrugged. “They might die, but they will probably also stockpile some corpses from the moles and stray players before they do. I should be able to create new minions even if some are destroyed. Besides, I still want to get my hands on some of those Rocs.” His eyes gleamed as he considered what he could build with a few of those birds.

“Damn it. He has that look again…” Frank whispered to Riley.

“It seems like a good plan,” Riley interjected, ignoring Frank. “It’s not like we can take the undead into town and it’s more productive than just leaving them here to rot in the sun.”

“Exactly!” Jason replied. Then his gaze drifted to the road south toward Falcon’s Hook. “Speaking of which, we still have a long way to go. We better get started.”

“Great,” Frank grumbled as he stared at the road. “Back on foot again. I’m really going to miss my mount…”

Chapter 8 - Timid

Alexion shifted impatiently, adjusting the sheath at his waist as a light rain pattered against the hood of his cloak. He was leaning against one of the massive trees that grew in the region south of the Crystal Reach with Caerus standing patiently beside him. From this vantage point, Alexion had an unobstructed view of the valley below and the mage city looming in the sky. It was certainly impressive, or at least it had been when he had first witnessed Vaerwald nearly an hour ago.

The city was comprised of twelve floating rings which hovered over the basin in a column. Alexion could only assume that magic was responsible for keeping the discs afloat. Bronze tubing stretched between the rings, creating a patchwork system of pipes that gleamed in the gloomy, gray light that managed to filter through the dense cloud cover.

A nephilim guard suddenly dropped from a nearby tree, his wings beat hard as he approached the ground and kicked up a fine mist of dirt and water. Alexion had made sure to keep his men in the trees and out of sight. There was no sense alerting the players and NPCs to their presence.

Caerus spoke with the guard in hushed tones before turning to Alexion. "The fire guild master is approaching," the noble reported.

"About damn time," Alexion said. The void in the back of his mind throbbed and pulsed in irritation at being made to wait. He forcefully suppressed the sensation. The goal of this meeting was to endear himself to the fire guild master – not cause a scene.

A few moments later, a small group of red-robed men and women emerged along the path that wound down towards the valley below. Leading the pack was a large-set man, his legs making long, purposeful strides as he approached. His robes were higher-caliber than the others, the material emblazoned with embroidered flames. The mage also held a staff crafted from a rich mahogany in one hand. A crystal pulsed at the top of the staff, fire tumbling and swirling within its depths.

"Master Gracien," Caerus spoke first, approaching the man leading the fire mages. "It is a pleasure to meet you again. It has been too long."

The fire guild master snorted abrasively, waving at the other fire mages to take up defensive positions nearby but out of earshot. "Not long enough. After hiking through the woods, I'm in no mood to exchange pleasantries. What is it you want this time, Caerus?"

It was clear that the pair knew each other, but Alexion could only wonder at their history. Given Gracien's blunt manner, perhaps Alexion should be direct. "Let me introduce myself," he said, stepping forward. "My name is Alexion, and I am the Regent of the Crystal Reach."

The fire mage master inspected him with a bored expression, not bothering to offer his hand in greeting. "Interesting. You must be the whelp that claimed the Lady's city. I was expecting someone more… imposing," Gracien commented.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Alexion replied calmly, ignoring the man's posturing. "But let us get down to business. We have heard rumors that a member of the Twilight Throne recently visited Vaerwald. Is this true?"

Gracien grimaced, anger flashing in his eyes. "It is. A traveler by the name of Riley," he offered. "She and a group of low-street trash blew up part of the tube system and set fire to the Great Library. They also assaulted members of my guild – putting several dozen men and women in the infirmary."

Alexion glanced at Caerus, remembering the information the noble had fed him. "And the city's Council simply let her go?"

Gracien's expression darkened further. "That decision was made despite my warnings. We should have made an example of the girl and the threat that dark mana poses to the city. Yet the other fools wouldn't listen to reason. They quake in their robes instead of taking a hard stance."

"A preemptive strike is often the best strategy," Alexion replied with a nod. "It is also disconcerting to hear that the Council doesn't value your opinion – especially after your guild members bore the brunt of Riley's actions." This earned him a snort of agreement from the surly mage.

Alexion hesitated for a moment, rubbing at his chin with one hand. "I understand that your guild has been purchasing undead slaves. Is that true?" Alexion asked, watching the man closely.

The fire guild master glared at Alexion, his eyes taking on a crimson hue as he began channeling his fire mana. "You are clearly well informed. The real question is why you insist on wasting my time asking questions to which you already seem to know the answer? Get to the point. Why are we here?"

A small smile curled Alexion's lips. "I just wanted to be certain we are working from accurate information," he explained in a conciliatory tone. "But to answer your question, I'm here to make you an offer. An alliance of sorts." Alexion's smile widened. "How would you like to work with The Crystal Reach?"

* * *

The group spent the next hour marching steadily south. They made much slower time without their skeletal mounts. Frank's new shapeshifting ability also delayed their progress. He insisted on

summoning the wings every time his stamina managed to regenerate in order to practice flying. He was terrible at it, spending more time crashing painfully into the ground than he managed to stay airborne. As a result, the group had to stop frequently to let him heal.

Eventually, the southern road intersected with another thoroughfare. The tree cover had thinned out considerably along the coast, yet Jason could just make out the edge of a forest to the west. After glancing at their map, the group made a turn to the east.

As they neared the town of Falcon's Hook, the player population began to increase dramatically. Dusty rogues, archers, and warriors marched along the roadway, chattering animatedly. Players lingered in the fields along the road, likely slaying the wildlife. Jason was a bit taken aback by the sheer number of travelers in and around the city. Even with the recent increase in players, the Twilight Throne still felt nearly deserted. Although, he supposed that no one had destroyed Falcon's Hook and killed off half the NPCs. That might have something to do with the popularity of Jason's undead city.

The gates of Falcon's Hook came into view a few minutes later. Enormous blocks of stone had been piled in layers, creating a wall around the city that stretched nearly two dozen feet into the air. Even from this distance, Jason could tell that the town had been built on the edge of a cliff – the ocean stretching out toward the horizon behind the towering walls.

As she caught sight of Falcon's Hook, Riley tugged down at the edge of her hood to conceal her face and blond hair. Jason also noted that she had covered her bow with her cloak. "We need to be careful from here on out," she said softly to Jason and Frank as they passed a group of players heading in the other direction. "If you go into the system menu, you can disable your guild tags. At least that will make us harder to identify."

"Will do," Frank replied with a shrug. "At least Jason and I have common names. There must be a few thousand 'Franks' and 'Jasons' playing the game at this point."

"I never thought I would be happy to have such a boring name," Jason offered, taking Riley's advice and pulling up his system menu with a quick flick of his wrist. He knew that disabling his guild tag would help, but it wouldn't be a foolproof way to avoid detection if they encountered a player with a high *Perception* skill.

Jason sighed. "We probably need to maintain a low profile here. Let's try not to start a fight or draw any attention to ourselves. Our priority is finding information on this island."

"And maybe a way to get there?" Frank offered with a short laugh. "Unless you were thinking of making us swim." He paused for a second as he chewed on that thought. "You weren't planning to make

us swim, were you?"

Jason rolled his eyes and focused his attention back on the road. As they approached the gates, Jason saw a pair of guards standing nearby wearing heavy mail. Players and other NPCs passed in front of the men with little fanfare, the guards rarely disturbing the flow of traffic.

As Jason's group moved to pass the guards, they suddenly looked more alert, their eyes inspecting the three players closely. "Halt there, travelers," one of the guards demanded, taking a step forward.

Damn it. Is this a result of our infamy? Jason wondered. He couldn't help but recall the reaction of the guards when he had first entered the game, and this was the first time that he had traveled to another city.

Jason could feel his shoulders tense, and he rested his hand on his dagger underneath his cloak. He eyed the players around them. If they made a scene here, it would likely turn into a brawl – one they would almost certainly lose without his minions. Frank and Riley stayed quiet, but Jason could see the nearly palpable tension hovering over the pair as their hands crept toward their weapons.

"How can I help you?" Jason asked, trying to keep his tone even.

"You all look like you're new to these parts," the guard continued. His buddy had stepped over to join him, his knuckles white around the shaft of his spear. "What's your business in Falcon's Hook?"

Jason had considered his story on the long journey to the city. "We're here searching for trade opportunities. We've picked up some merchandise in that disgusting undead city to the northwest. We're hoping to find a ship and a crew willing to help us haul our merchandise down the coast."

The guards looked at each other skeptically. "Where are your goods?" one of the men demanded harshly.

Jason spread his hands wide. "This is just a first visit. Once we find a crew, then we can invest in shipping the goods to Falcon's Hook. Besides, we wanted to scout the road conditions for ourselves. No sense losing our first shipment due to bandits or monster attacks."

"Hmph," the guard snorted. "Give us a moment."

"Sure thing. Take your time," Jason replied, trying to sound relaxed.

The two men stepped away, speaking to each other in hushed tones and glancing at Jason's group. "What do we do if they don't buy it?" Riley asked in a hushed tone.

"Die quickly is my guess," Frank answered tersely, eyeing the

constant stream of players going in and out of the city. “Look how many players there are around here. We won’t last two minutes.”

“Relax,” Jason interjected. “Just keep acting normal. The guards might sense our infamy, but our cloaks and disabled guild tags might get us through. I’ve had some success using disguises in the past.”

Finally, the two guards approached the group again, serious expressions lingering on their faces. “We’re going to let you all inside.” He hesitated slightly, glancing at his companion. “We might also be able to help you with your trade problem. If you seek out House Cairn, they should be able to offer you a boat and a crew for a reasonable price.”

“House Cairn?” Riley asked.

The guarded looked at Riley in surprise. “You don’t even know the trade houses that run this city?” He shook his head in bewilderment.

“Our apologies,” Jason jumped in. “As I mentioned before, this is a scouting trip for us. We were also hoping to better acquaint ourselves with the city and its trade houses. Maybe you could elaborate?” As Jason asked this last question, a gold coin appeared in his hand, and he offered it to the guard. “Of course, we’d be happy to pay you for your time.”

The guard glanced at the coin in surprise before snatching it and thrusting it into his pocket. A smile crept across his face. “Certainly. By the way, my name is Rupert Fen, and my friend here is Harold Fletcher.”

“Pleasure to meet you both,” Jason replied with a small smile, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. It was interesting how quickly a bit of coin allowed you to make friends.

“To give you an introduction,” Rupert began, “this city is run by two trade houses: House Baen and House Cairn.”

“Been that way for as long as my family has lived here,” Harold added, nodding along to his partner’s story.

Rupert motioned at the purple livery some of the nearby NPCs wore. “That crest you see folks wearing represents House Cairn. Green livery stands for House Baen.” Jason hadn’t noticed the small emblems emblazoned on the residents’ clothing until the guards pointed them out.

The guard hesitated before continuing, glancing at his partner. “Others might not be so frank with you, but you three seem like good folk. If you’re going to pick up a crew here, you’re going to have to choose your loyalties carefully.”

“Is there some sort of tension between the two houses?” Jason inquired, curiosity tingeing his voice. “I’d rather not walk into a

conversation and say something that might give offense."

Rupert hesitated again, glancing at his partner. "Let's just say that they aren't on the best terms. Many old hostilities and grudges have built up over time."

Jason could begin to see why the two guards had acted a bit reserved at first and why Rupert was choosing his words carefully now. They were probably both being paid under the table by House Cairn – sending travelers and NPCs to that house by soliciting them at the gate. He doubted House Baen would be happy to discover that the city guards were effectively acting as salesmen for a rival trade house.

"Well, we appreciate your help," Jason said. He looked Rupert in the eye. "We'll also be sure to mention you by name when we make a visit to House Cairn."

A broad smile stretched across Rupert's face, and he gave a knowing wink. "I would surely appreciate that. You all have a good time in Falcon's Hook and don't hesitate to reach out if we can be of any assistance."

"Certainly," Jason said, beginning to move away from the guards. Then he stopped and turned back to the two men. "Is there a good tavern in town where we could talk to some of the ship crews directly?"

"Aye," Rupert answered with a nod. "The Seaman's Folly is near the wharf on the far side of town. Trust me, you can't miss it."

"Thank you," Jason replied and then turned away.

As the group made their way into the interior of the town, Frank spoke up, "Is everyone in this game a crook?"

"I like to think we bring it out in people," Riley responded in a dry tone.

Jason shrugged, recalling the encounter he had witnessed between George and the detective in the real world and the way the businessman had pressured Thomas into letting Jason go. "I'm beginning to think that this is just the way the world works – in-game or out. But it's clear from the guard's story that we need to tread carefully here. Let's be circumspect about what we say until we know which house we want to align ourselves with."

"Agreed. What's our first step?" Riley asked.

Jason's gaze shifted to the sky, where he noticed the sun beginning to drift toward the horizon. "We have a few hours until nightfall. My thought is that we should visit the inn. We might be able to identify the island we're looking for by talking to the sailors. We also need more information about these two houses before we speak to anyone important."

"Sounds like a plan to me!" Frank said. "Let's get started."

With that, the group started off towards the far end of the city.

As they strode forward, it immediately became clear that Falcon's Hook had been built in a hodge-podge fashion over the years. The buildings towered three and four stories tall – consisting of ramshackle wooden structures that had been tacked onto the original buildings. Planks and gangways connected the houses on the second and third floors, creating a patchwork of raised streets.

It took the three nearly twenty minutes to traverse the city. Once they reached the far eastern end of town, the roadway dead-ended into a cliff face overlooking a bay. Winding wooden walkways had been built along the side of the cliff, leading down to a port that stretched into the bay. Waning sunlight glimmered off the water as boats swayed gently in the rhythmic waves that rippled across the bay.

"This is strange," Riley said almost wistfully as she looked out at the ships, the breeze quickening and pushing back at her hood. "It's difficult to tell this isn't real, but the smell gives it away. It's just not quite strong enough – like it's missing… *something*."

"I know what you mean," Jason said, sparing a glance at Alfred. He had wondered about the lack of smell before, but he hadn't ever asked the AI about it. He'd have to add it to his ever-growing list of questions.

"I think I found our tavern," Frank called out, trotting up to the pair and gesturing to a building further along the edge of the cliff. Indeed, Jason could see a group of townsfolk and players spilling out of the open doorway of an enormous structure perched a few dozen feet from the cliff's edge. A wooden sign swung above the tavern door, the image of a broken ship painted across the panel.

"Let's get on with it then," Jason said, mentally preparing himself to politely interrogate the sailors inside. Frank and Riley followed a step behind him.

After the group managed to push their way inside the tavern, they discovered a large common room filled to the brim with boisterous patrons. Shouted conversations and curses filled the room with a cacophony of noise that made it difficult to hear his teammates. Jason leaned in close to Frank and Riley, suggesting that they split up to talk to the sailors. They'd cover more ground that way. He received curt nods in return, and the group separated.

Jason inched his way over to the bar along the back of the room. His goal was to buy himself a drink and perhaps catch the attention of the barkeep – who he hoped would have his finger on the pulse of Falcon's Hook. Jason found a stool on the far end of the bar away from most of the noise and gestured at the portly innkeeper that stood behind the counter.

"What can I get for you?" the man demanded curtly, wiping

away the sweat from his brow.

"Just a beer," Jason replied, laying down some copper coins on the bar. He noted the way the man kept looking back at the other patrons at the bar. With the inn this crowded, he didn't seem to have time to speak with Jason.

A moment later, a mug of ale landed on the counter in front of Jason, the amber liquid sloshing over the rim. Before Jason could offer his thanks, the innkeeper was gone – already serving another patron.

So much for that plan.

Sighing, Jason decided to turn his attention back to the inn's clientele. Most appeared to be sailors, their hands coarse and their skin tanned by long days in the sun. They were all armed. Rapiers and curved swords hung from the waist of more than one sailor, and Jason's *Perception* skill also picked out concealed daggers and knives. His eyes lingered on the insignias embroidered onto each man's clothing, identifying their house.

Jason's brow furrowed as he realized that the tavern was divided into two camps, the houses claiming tables on either side of the room. The only exception was a table near the back of the common room near Jason where a young girl sat alone. Her attention was focused on an assortment of vials spread out across the wooden surface, oblivious to the noise in the tavern. She wore a pair of wireframe glasses, and her straight black hair had been chopped short – ending at her shoulders. As Jason watched, she ground something in a small stone mortar and then carefully poured the contents into one of the vials.

That might be a good place to start, he thought as he watched the girl. He didn't notice any insignia on her clothes so she might be a bit more impartial.

He was just about to stand and approach the girl when a sailor accidentally collided with a serving girl. The blow sent the poor maid tumbling forward, her tray of drinks flying through the air and crashing against a nearby table. The room quieted slightly at the commotion, loud curses filling the air as a group of angry men covered in sticky beer rose to their feet.

One of the now dripping-wet sailors grabbed the man who had stumbled into the waitress. "What the fuck was that? You owe our group another round," he shouted, his face growing red.

The rather drunk-looking man looked at him in confusion. Then his gaze darted to the sailor's insignia, and a glimmer of recognition flashed in his eyes. "It'll be a cold day in hell before I buy Cairn men a round. Besides, I heard your kind preferred to lap it up off the floor like a dog. Consider this a favor!" This earned the man a round of laughter from the members of House Baen that lingered around the

room.

Jason's attention shifted to the other patrons, noting the angry expressions of the Cairn men and women and the way their hands were already creeping toward their weapons. He could also see Frank and Riley trying to filter through the crowded area and make their way over to him, likely sensing the rising tension.

"You calling me a dog?" the sailor growled. "Maybe you and your other Baen mates need a reminder of which house rules this city." With that last statement, the sailor suddenly lashed out with his fist. The blow struck the clumsy man directly on the bridge of his nose – a resounding crunch echoing through the room.

The man fell back, his arms wheeling madly. He landed heavily on the table where the lone girl had been sitting. Her carefully sorted vials shot into the air and then tumbled to the ground with a tinkling crash of glass. More sailors leaped to their feet – their fists raised and weapons materializing in their hands. Soon a whirlwind of motion filled the room, as clashes of steel and screams of pain reverberated through the enclosed space.

Jason didn't spare any attention to the brawl that had erupted inside the inn. His focus was riveted on the young woman that had been sitting at the table. She sat frozen amid the chaos, staring at the vials now strewn about the floor. Raising her head, she seemed to take in the fighting around her for the first time. A flicker of anger flashed in her eyes before they turned a vibrant sapphire.

As the man that landed on her table rose from the ground and rounded on his attacker with unsteady steps, the girl stood. A short wand had appeared in one hand, a blue crystal embedded in the top, while her free hand darted through the gestures of a spell. Thin tendrils of mist began to form along the wand and drift through the room, spreading slowly among the oblivious sailors. As the vapor thickened and grew, Jason could see that it throbbed with a strange, sickly yellow light. Jason quickly covered his mouth with the hem of his cloak and moved to an area where the fog was less dense, sparing a few seconds to send Frank and Riley a message to do the same.

Then the girl finished casting.

All at once, the mist expanded rapidly, immediately engulfing the sailors and obscuring them from sight. As Jason looked on with wide eyes, he realized that the vapor left a clear pocket of air around the girl and the tavern staff – who had all immediately frozen when they saw the girl stand up. The sounds of coughing could be heard in the mist, and the clash of steel began to fade. There was a series of dull thuds before everything finally grew quiet.

A moment later, the girl gave a dismissive wave of her hand and the cloud of mist abruptly cleared. Jason gaped in surprise as he

glanced around the room. The bodies of nearly sixty sailors now rested along the floor of the tavern. Many were slumped over each other, their eyes shut and their chests rising and falling in a slow rhythm.

One of the sailors had managed to stay awake, and he reached a feeble hand toward the girl, his eyes wide with fear. “The witch…” he whispered before passing out among his fellow sailors.

“What the hell…” Jason murmured to himself, his gaze shifting back to the girl. She looked around herself impassively for a moment as her eyes reverted to their normal color. Then she stooped and began calmly picking up her vials from the floor as though nothing had happened.

Jason spared a glance across the room and saw that Frank and Riley were still standing. Their weapons were drawn, and they were holding the hem of their cloaks over their noses and mouths. He made a quick gesture toward the girl and put up a staying hand.

“Here, let me help you,” Jason offered, standing and approaching the girl.

She glanced up at him in surprise, pushing her glasses back on her nose with a finger. “Th-thank you. You really don’t have to,” she said, not quite meeting his eyes.

Jason picked up the toppled table and righted it, shifting the bodies of the unconscious sailors out of the way. Then he began placing intact vials back on its surface. “It’s not a problem. These other men were rather rude. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your name?”

The girl didn’t bother to look at him this time as she continued to pick up her crafting materials. “My name is Eliza,” she said quietly.

“Well, Eliza, what you just did to these sailors was incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Jason noticed his friends approaching cautiously, and he motioned for them to lower their weapons. “By the way, my name is Jason, and my friends here are Frank and Riley,” he said, offering a hand to the girl. He didn’t see any recognition in her eyes as he said their names. Perhaps she didn't keep up with gaming news.

“That was incredible!” Frank exclaimed. “Are they asleep?”

Eliza’s face flushed a little. “Yes. Warren Root and Calypsis Leaf.”

“Huh?” Frank replied, his face scrunching in confusion.

“I think those are the ingredients for a potion,” Riley offered, rolling her eyes at Frank. “Right?” she asked, turning back to Eliza.

The girl nodded shyly.

Eliza set the remainder of her ingredients and tools on the table and then retook her seat. “How long exactly does this last?” Jason

asked, gesturing around the room.

"About thirty minutes, but they'll wake up if you disturb them much," she explained as she methodically re-ordered the vials into some sort of pattern that Jason couldn't quite understand.

"Well, since you're one of the few conscious people in the room now, do you mind if we join you?" Riley asked, winking at Jason surreptitiously.

Eliza's eyes jumped up to the group, a hand pushing back at a tendril of hair that had fallen in her face. "If you want," she replied noncommittally, returning to her task.

As the group took their seats, the innkeeper stepped out from around the bar, sparing a scowl at the bodies littering the floor. He approached the table and set a drink in front of Eliza. "Thank you, girl. I'm sorry about your potions. As usual, I'll reimburse you for the cost," he offered. "You certainly spared me quite a bit of property damage."

"It's not a problem," Eliza responded meekly.

"What does he mean 'as usual'?" Riley asked as the man walked away, stopping for a moment to kick the prone sailor that had started the brawl.

Eliza shrugged slightly. "I do a few odd jobs around the city. Gerald pays me to work here and keep the peace. It's terrible for my productivity, but the coin he offers helps pay for crafting materials." She gestured at the vials and materials on the table.

"Are you an alchemist?" Jason asked.

Eliza nodded. Looking up she hesitated, studying them curiously. "You avoided the mist," she said, tilting her head slightly to the side. "You covered your faces, didn't you?" At Jason's nod, she smiled slightly. "The sailors never catch on. Even most players don't notice it until it's too late."

"It's an impressive trick," Jason said. "You're going to have to show me how you did that. I didn't realize that water magic included some sort of poison spell."

"It doesn't," the girl replied quietly, pouring the contents of one vial into another and swirling the mixture gently. Changing the subject, she asked, "Why are you all here – if you don't mind my asking?"

Frank interjected. "We were hoping to talk to the sailors about a nearby island. Of course, that plan has sailed now. Ha. Get it?" he asked Jason and Riley. This earned him a small smile from the shy water mage and a groan from Riley.

"Why are you looking for an island?" Eliza asked.

As Jason debated how much to divulge to the girl, Alfred chose that moment to leap up into her lap. He purred at her softly as she

reached out a tentative hand to stroke his head. Jason watched the exchange with a puzzled expression. If the AI trusted this girl, then maybe he should be more candid about their goal.

"We're looking for an ancient temple," he explained. "We don't have much more to go on other than that the temple is located on an island near Falcon's Hook."

The girl tilted her head for a moment as though listening to something and her gaze shifted to a vacant seat at a nearby table. A small frown creased her lips, and she shook her head slightly. "I-I'm not sure I can help you. You might want to speak with one of the houses."

"I understand," Jason said with a nod. "Could you offer some advice on who we should speak with? It's obvious there is some sort of feud between these two trade houses, but we aren't sure which way to go here, and that brawl didn't exactly help," Jason trailed off, looking at the bodies still lying about the room.

Eliza looked back at the vacant seat sharply, muttering something under her breath. Jason could have sworn he heard her say something like "don't pressure me." He glanced at Frank and Riley and saw similar, confused expressions on their faces. Was the girl crazy?

"Fine," Eliza muttered, turning back to the group, her expression warring between irritation and resignation. "I suggest you meet with Lord Baen."

"Where exactly can we find him?" Riley asked uncertainly.

Eliza spared one last glance at the empty chair before sighing heavily. "I suppose I can show you the way. It's not like I ever have any choice." With that cryptic response, Eliza rose to her feet, piled her vials into her bag, and spared a wave at the innkeeper.

As she led the group through the inn's doorway, Jason's eyes rested on Eliza's back. He felt conflicted. Between the spell she had used to disable the sailors and her strange behavior, there was definitely something unusual about the girl, but they needed the help. He would just have to keep a watchful eye on her.

Chapter 9 - Agitated

"What exactly are you suggesting?" Gracien demanded.

"A partnership," Alexion responded. "I get the sense that your opinion – and your guild for that matter – are not respected by Vaerwald's Council. We also have a common enemy in the Twilight Throne. I believe I can assist you with both of these difficulties."

The fire guild master paused, clearly mulling over the offer. "How exactly do you plan to accomplish this feat?"

A humorless smile stretched Alexion's lips. "I understand that the fire guild acts as Vaerwald's police force and its first line of defense in the event of war. It stands to reason that your influence on the Council would be enhanced if something… unfortunate were to befall the city."

Gracien's eyes widened, and he glanced at Caerus with an incredulous expression. "What are you planning to do? There is a limit to what I will accept in terms of collateral damage – especially if it involves my city."

Alexion waived a dismissive hand. "The casualties to the city's residents will be nominal. I will ensure that the body count is weighted heavily toward the travelers. They are expendable after all," Alexion added, his smile widening further.

"Hmph. And what would I be expected to provide to this partnership?" the fire guild master demanded, his eyes flashing with crimson energy.

"Initially, we only need a few of the undead slaves you have purchased and some of the magical explosives that were used by Riley and her group," Alexion replied, keeping his irritation in check at the man's insolent tone. He felt he was close to closing this deal.

"I suspect you aren't doing this for free," Gracien grumbled. "What do you stand to gain by helping our guild?"

Alexion nodded. He had been expecting this question and had already prepared his reply. "My goal is to destroy the Twilight Throne. All I ask in return is your unflinching support in crushing the undead."

Gracien hesitated as he considered Alexion's offer. A fleeting expression flitted across his face – one that Alexion knew well. The man craved power. Coming to a decision, Gracien finally slammed the butt of his staff into the ground, flames swirling around the head and leaving small tendrils of smoke in their wake. "Your offer is acceptable. I can give you three of the undead. We recovered several caches of explosive crystals when we confiscated the enchanter's shop. Will this be sufficient for your purposes?"

"That will be perfect," Alexion replied with a small smile. "If you will deliver the crystals and undead to this grove later this evening, we will take it from there."

"Fine." The fire guild master moved to walk back down the trail, motioning to the other red-robed mages loitering among the trees. Pausing, he turned back to Alexion and met his gaze evenly. "Do not test me or think to betray me. I am a blessing to my allies and a calamity to my enemies." With that, he strode away, not bothering to wait for Alexion's response.

"Hmm, that went as well as could be expected," Caerus remarked as he watched the fire guild master retreat to Vaerwald. "What do you plan to do next?"

"We need to prepare our forces," Alexion replied, shifting his attention back to the noble. In a hushed tone, he added, "Gather two or three soldiers to undertake the mission – do not use travelers. There should not be any survivors. This includes our own men." Alexion couldn't afford to let word of his plan spread.

Caerus' eyes widened slightly, but he gave a curt nod. "It will be done," he replied. "I will leave now to attend to this matter."

Alexion didn't bother to respond. His gaze shifted back to Vaerwald, taking in the city's enormous floating rings. The sun was already beginning to creep toward the horizon, its rays peeking out briefly from behind the thick gray clouds that loomed in the sky. A throng of players and NPCs crowded around the platform that stood below the city, trying to return to Vaerwald before night fell.

The void in the back of Alexion's mind thrummed in approval as he considered what he planned to do next. As Caerus and his soldiers disappeared further back into the forest, Alexion thought for a moment that he felt a gentle hand rest on his shoulder. He could have sworn that he also smelled the familiar, tantalizing scent of perfume on the air.

* * *

The group stood outside of a gigantic home on the northern end of Falcon's Hook. In contrast to the makeshift appearance of the rest of the town, this building was a well-constructed manor with stone walls and curving graceful arches holding up a tiled roof. A short wall ringed the complex and opened into a small courtyard.

Yet Jason still noticed small signs of wear and disrepair, the defects highlighted in blue as his *Perception* skill triggered. Many of the roof tiles were broken, and some were missing altogether. The entry courtyard was riddled with leaves and dirt, and the fountain –

broken and in disrepair – had moss and weeds growing around the base.

"This is Lord Baen's manor," Eliza explained, adjusting her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

"It's not much to look at," Frank remarked. "Or maybe I'm just getting spoiled."

"No. This house has definitely seen better days," Riley agreed.

"Should we just step inside?" Jason asked Eliza, uncertain how to proceed. He didn't see any guards or attendants present at the gate.

The water mage shrugged. "I guess so."

The group stepped into the courtyard and approached the front door. It was solid oak with ornate patterns carved into its surface. A heavy iron knocker was affixed to the door, and Jason tentatively tried knocking. When that met with no response, he pulled at the door handle experimentally. It promptly shifted open, the hinges squeaking loudly.

"What do you think you are doing?" a voice demanded from inside the manor. The scowling face of a middle-aged gentleman suddenly appeared in the doorway. He wore a velvet tunic and his clothing was pressed and well cared for.

Jason jumped slightly, startled at the man's sudden appearance. "I'm sorry. There was no one at the gate, and no one answered the door when we knocked. We're here to see Master Baen. Is he available?"

"*Lord* Baen is in his study," the man replied, eyeing the group's weapons and dusty armor with distaste. "I believe he has a few minutes until his next meeting. Who should I ask is calling for him?"

Jason's gaze shifted to Eliza. "Eliza…"

"Eliza Zhao," she offered, picking up on Jason's cue.

The man sniffed and opened the door wider. "Fine. You all can come inside and take a seat in the sitting room to the right. Please do not touch anything." With that last statement, the man disappeared back into the house.

"Nice guy," Frank commented dryly.

Jason couldn't help but agree that the man's demeanor was off-putting. He and the group stepped inside the home, finding themselves in a grand entryway. A massive staircase stood in the center of the room, the banister spiraling up toward the second floor. Glancing to the right, Jason caught sight of the sitting room the butler had mentioned.

The group took up seats in the waiting room, shuffling uncomfortably on the ornate furniture that filled the room. Jason could only surmise that the furnishings had been crafted more as works of art than as practical furniture. As a result, the group

breathed a collective sigh of relief when the stuffy butler finally reappeared.

"Lord Baen will see you now," he intoned. "Please follow me."

The man started off through the house, and the group ascended to the second floor. Jason didn't notice any other staff or guests in the manor. Instead, the house was filled with an almost unbearable silence. After the courtyard and the gruff introduction by the butler, Jason was wondering if they had chosen the right house. This certainly didn't seem like the manor for the leader of one of the city's most prominent trading houses.

A few minutes later, the butler opened a door on the building's second floor. In contrast to the rest of the dreary house, this room was brightly lit, and flames crackled in the fireplace along the back wall.

"Ahh, Eliza," a man called from across the room. He was sitting in a voluminous, leather chair near the fireplace. "Come here girl and let me take a look at you."

As the group approached, Lord Baen finally came into view. He was an older gentleman. What hair he had left had turned a bright gray some time ago. A cane rested against his chair, and his leg was propped on a small stool, evidence of a possible injury. He took the water mage's reluctant hand, raising it to his lips. "The tonic you and Alma whipped up did the trick. The pain has been much less taxing!"

"I'm glad I could help," Eliza replied shyly.

Lord Baen's gaze turned to the remainder of the group. "Who are your friends? They look like a rather dangerous bunch." The older man rounded on Eliza. "Have you taken in with a bad crowd? That really won't do – you're such a nice girl." Eliza looked flustered, her eyes darting between Jason and the older gentleman.

Jason interjected with a chuckle, pushing back the hood of his cloak to reveal his face. "I assure you that we don't intend to corrupt Eliza. We actually ran into her at the tavern near the docks and mentioned that we are exploring the town and local area. She indicated that we should speak to you directly."

Lord Baen's eyes focused on Jason for the first time. "Ahh, well, in that case, welcome to my home. A friend of my little potion-bearing girl here is a friend of mine."

The butler coughed from the doorway, catching Lord Baen's attention. "Would you like for me to fetch refreshments for your guests, sir?"

"Yes, yes. Please do, Gerald," Lord Baen said waving his hand dismissively. "The rest of you can take a seat," he offered, motioning to the other vacant chairs near the fire.

Riley and Frank spared a confused glance at Jason. This wasn't quite what they had been expecting from the leader of one of the rival

houses. Where were the guards? Where were the attendants? Something felt off.

As the group got themselves settled, Lord Baen spoke up, “So what exactly are you all looking for again?”

“We actually haven’t explained that yet,” Riley replied. “We’re looking for an island near Falcon’s Hook. It might have once been home to a temple – although it may be nothing more than ruins at this point.”

Lord Baen’s eyes widened in alarm. “An island you say? There is only one island around here, and I’m afraid it’s a deathtrap. Why would you be interested in such a place?”

Jason was forced to ponder a moment on how best to answer that question – not wanting to reveal their real goal. He was starting to get used to the constant lying. “We’re explorers,” he began slowly, “and we’ve been tasked with retrieving an item from this old temple. A collector has enlisted us to retrieve it and offered a considerable reward if we were able to recover the item.”

The older man shook his head, his face somber. “It’s a fruitless quest then. There is nothing but death waiting for you on Anguine Isle. The sailors in town avoid it like the plague,” he added, trailing off into a pensive silence as his gaze lingered on the fireplace.

Lord Baen sighed. “You all have probably noticed that my manor has seen better days.” He smiled as he saw Jason open his mouth to object. “My eyesight has gotten worse over the years, but there is no need to lie for my benefit.

“The truth is that we’re on our last legs. Historically the two houses that run Falcon’s Hook have had an *arrangement*. Our house would handle trade contracts heading north along the coast – journeying to Carmellon and even as far as Tristram. House Cairn would then take the contracts heading south.

“In those days, the city was thriving,” he explained wistfully. “The island changed all of that, and it has just been growing worse over time,” the older man muttered.

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“What I mean is that any boat that travels near the island disappears. It used to be that skirting Anguine Isle by a few leagues was sufficient. Now, any vessel that gets within forty leagues vanishes without a trace. So, we began sending ships further and further afield to avoid the island, but this adds days and even weeks to a trade shipment – which is fine if you’re shipping clothing or nonperishable goods. Anything else and it will be a rotten mess by the time it arrives!

“The loss of several cargos set us back considerably. You wouldn’t believe the stink our insurers raise every time a ship goes

missing. We had difficulty proving our losses with no survivors or sign of the ships and we were ultimately forced to come out of pocket to replace the cargos."

"There are insurance companies inside the game?" Jason heard Frank whisper to Riley.

Jason was also a little shocked at the depth that Alfred had added to the game world, but he needed to stay focused on his conversation with Lord Baen. "I see the problem."

Lord Baen nodded, a hand rubbing idly at his right knee. "So, what did my family start doing? They began pilfering trade contracts from House Cairn. As you can imagine, that went over splendidly with that selfish old bastard Joseph Cairn. Now here we are, with rising tensions between the two houses."

The old man shook his head. "However, we're losing the war. On top of the issues we encountered with Anguine Isle, our ships heading south were suddenly being attacked by so-called *pirates*, our crews would desert at the last minute, and entire shipments would suddenly go missing. Other shipments have been loaded onto the wrong boats altogether."

"Was House Cairn responsible for that?" Riley asked.

Lord Baen's lips pinched into a grimace. "I suspect it was retaliation for pilfering Joseph's clients. Our men certainly leaped to that conclusion. Yet proof is still lacking."

Jason was following along with the old man's explanation. "You had few options other than to devote your remaining resources to purchasing new ships and hiring new crews," Jason said, thinking aloud.

"That's the long and short of it," the older man replied curtly.

"Didn't anyone try to determine what was causing the ships to go missing near Anguine Isle?" Frank asked. "That seems like it would have helped solve these problems."

Lord Baen looked at the burly barbarian sadly. "And here we arrive at the worst of it. My son's thoughts were the same as your own. He insisted that our family's fortune depended on exploring that island. He became obsessed with researching the origin of this mysterious mist."

The older man gestured at the books and scrolls piled on a nearby table in the center of the room and the bookshelves ringing the study. "He became convinced that an important relic had been taken to the island a long time ago and that it might explain the mists and strange disappearances."

Jason and his group perked up at the mention of a relic. Could it be that Lord Baen was referring to the Grimoire? "What type of relic?" Jason asked. "Did your son's research provide any hints?"

"He just kept muttering something about a sphere. Supposedly, it provides some control over the sea. Not that this helps clarify much," Lord Baen muttered, rubbing at his temple.

Riley looked thoughtful, watching the older gentleman. "You said that this was the worst part of your story. What happened to your son?"

Lord Baen sighed heavily. "He was insistent on exploring that island. He used most of our remaining funds to hire a ship and crew to take him to the island – a *foreign* crew, mind you. The sailors here in town won't go near it. I never heard from my boy again." With this final statement, the gentleman lapsed into a pain-filled silence.

The butler chose just that moment to return with drinks and refreshments for Jason and his group. The door to the study creaked open with a groan, and the uptight attendant rolled in a tea trolley – handing a beverage to each guest. He then set down a large silver tray on a circular table in the center of the sitting area, small biscuits heaped on its surface. Frank grabbed a handful and promptly stuffed one in his mouth.

Riley took advantage of the lull in the conversation, raising an eyebrow and gesturing toward Lord Baen. Jason picked up on her message. "Lord Baen," he began, "perhaps we could help one another. It sounds like this Anguine Isle is the place we're looking for – although the spherical relic does not match our employer's description. What if we were to investigate this island on your behalf?"

The old man glanced up at Jason, a brief flash of hope flaring in his eyes before vanishing beneath the familiar pallor of sadness. "I appreciate the offer, but have you not been listening? It's a hopeless quest."

"My friends and I are quite capable of handling ourselves," Jason interjected. "We might also be able to find evidence of what happened to your son."

The older man shook his head. "I'm certain he's dead. It has been nearly a year since he left." Then Lord Baen shook himself, refocusing on the group. "What we desperately need is that orb – assuming it even exists. With that relic, we might remove the curse on the island. If my son was right, it might also allow us to recover our family's fortune."

"That certainly seems like a self-serving goal," Frank muttered, eyeing the old man skeptically. This earned him a glare from the butler who now hovered nearby.

"Perhaps," Lord Baen acknowledged. "But I can't afford to be anything but pragmatic at this stage. My family is all dead and buried, and I'm one more lost shipment from losing everything."

He locked eyes with Frank, staring him down. “If you need to comfort yourself with an altruistic motive, perhaps you should consider what will happen to our crews and the tradesmen that rely on our employment and services. House Cairn might pick up a few of the scraps that are left, but this would be a devastating blow to the city and surrounding area.”

Frank’s eyes widened, clearly not certain how to respond.

“Then we can try to retrieve this orb you’ve described,” Jason volunteered. “If you can provide a crew and a ship, we will investigate this island for you.”

Lord Baen seemed to consider this proposal, a frown creasing his lips. Gerald eyed him with concern. “Sir, you can’t seriously be contemplating sending another crew to their deaths,” he said. “This is madness.”

“And what other option do we have?” Lord Baen replied in a resigned tone. “We can’t compete with House Cairn any longer. Maybe it is time for one last ditch effort.”

He gave a final sigh before glancing up at Jason. “Fine, boy. I will give you a boat and a crew. In return, I want you to bring me back this relic. And,” he began, his voice thickening with emotion, “if you discover what happened to my son…”

“We will do our best,” Jason assured him. He hesitated for a brief moment before continuing, his mind running through the logistics of traveling to the island. “When is the soonest we can leave?”

“I heard that there is a foreign crew that arrived earlier this morning. I can speak with the captain this evening. Assuming he is willing, you could be ready to launch by tomorrow.”

“Good,” Jason replied. “We need to leave at nightfall. Please communicate that to the captain.”

“Nightfall,” the older man muttered. “Are you mad?” Then he hesitated, chuckling slightly, “What am I asking? Of course, you must be crazy if you are undertaking this hopeless quest. Fine. It will be done.” As the old man uttered this last statement, a prompt flashed in Jason’s vision.

Quest Update: Strength of Many

After arriving in Falcon’s Hook, you discovered that the town has been divided by two warring trade families. Lord Baen explained that the rivalry began as a result of the disappearance of ships around Anguine Isle - possibly caused by an unknown relic. This island also seems to match the descriptions that Morgan provided and may be a

good place to start in recovering the Dark One's Grimoire.

Difficulty: A
Primary Success: Gather the following three ingredients:

1. Heart of a dungeon boss.
2. The Dark One's Grimoire.
3. Two willing sacrifices.

Secondary Success: Recover the relic that is causing the mists surrounding Anguine Isle and return it to Lord Baen.
Failure: Unknown
Reward: Advancement in the Path of the Dark

At least we seem to be moving along the correct path, Jason thought. *I just hope I don't regret traveling to a mysterious death island.*

Jason's gaze shifted to Eliza where she sat quietly nearby. She had listened to most of the exchange with Lord Baen in silence. She now fidgeted in her chair, glancing at the air beside her and shaking her head slightly while muttering under her breath. As Jason watched, a flash of anger filled her eyes, followed swiftly by a look of resignation.

"Umm," Eliza interjected. "I would like to accompany you if you will take me."

"Oh, my dear girl," Lord Baen replied, his eyes widening. "This isn't the sort of journey for young alchemists. You would be much safer staying at Alma's cottage," he suggested, a look of concern clouding his expression.

Eliza sighed, glancing at the empty air beside her once more. "I understand, but I would still like to go," she said in a grudging tone. She turned to face Jason. "May I accompany you?"

Jason spared a quick look at Riley and Frank. His burly friend shrugged indifferently while Riley inspected the water mage closely, curiosity lingering in her eyes. They didn't seem to have any immediate issues with Eliza joining the group and Jason had to admit that he had been impressed with how quickly she had incapacitated the sailors. Perhaps she would be useful.

"Sure. I suppose you can come with us," Jason said finally. He glanced at his in-game clock and noted the late hour in the real world. "We will leave tomorrow evening in-game. Speaking of which, we probably need to break for tonight."

"You may all stay here this evening," Lord Baen spoke up, still looking at Eliza with a worried expression. "It's not as though anyone else is using this place."

With that matter decided, the group broke for the evening, and Eliza retreated further into the house. As Jason watched the girl walk away, he could have sworn that he heard her muttering something about “stupid sheep” under her breath.

“She’s a weird girl,” Riley said, her eyes also lingering on Eliza. “Are you certain about bringing her along? She still doesn’t know who we really are.”

“We can use all the help we can get. Who knows what we’ll find on this island.”

“Assuming we even make it that far. You know, what with the death mist and all,” Frank muttered, coming up behind them and stuffing another biscuit in his mouth.

Jason shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Chapter 10 - Sheltered

Claire and Robert sat on the central dais in the control room, the other lab techs bustling around them as the hum of an active office echoed through the room. The routine commotion in the room was abruptly interrupted as the screen above the lab suddenly flickered to life, a notification painted on the screen. The techs around the room all glanced up in confusion.

"What's going on?" Claire asked, turning to Robert.

His brow was furrowed, and he was typing animatedly at his terminal. "There appears to have been an incident in Vaerwald. One of the techs flagged it as unusual. I'm putting it up on the screen now."

The display stuttered for a moment and then resolved into the viewpoint of a player. The time stamp in the corner indicated that the footage was taken roughly twenty minutes ago. The player stood in line with other NPCs and players below Vaerwald – the city's disks looming above him.

Night had fallen some time ago, and the area around the player was faintly illuminated by floating globes of light. Massive bronze tubes rested on the platform a few yards away, the metallic tunnels stretching up to the city above them. Groups of players would enter an opening carved into the base of the tubing, and then jet-like gusts of air would launch them up through the pipes and into the city proper.

A flash of movement could be seen along the nearby tree line. The player glanced to the side, focusing on a black-robed figure sprinting toward the platform. As the mysterious individual neared the player, the camera abruptly jerked to the side and slammed into the ground nearby. The system automatically dampened the audio feedback on the video, but the group in the lab could still make out an unmistakable roaring noise in the background.

"What was that?" the man gasped, trying to sit back up with a pained groan. Notifications flashed in the corner of his vision, indicating that his health had plummeted, and his arm was broken.

The view panned back to the city, revealing the wreckage of what had once been the travel platform. Partially melted and singed metal now littered the area and bodies lay everywhere. Players and NPCs were bleeding out on the ground as their cries of pain filled the air. Massive hunks of bronze tubing crashed down around the player, throwing up dust and debris as the metal pipes continued to collapse.

Before the player could react, he saw a second form racing toward him. He put up his hands defensively, but it was already too late. The

figure's body exploded violently, his skin and clothing disintegrating in a flash of crackling energy. A searing light illuminated the display, and then the screen went dark – signaling the player's death.

The group in the lab stared at the dark screen with wide eyes. Robert shook his head, his fingers racing across the keyboard of his terminal. "It appears someone destroyed the travel platform below Vaerwald. Some type of fire-based explosive was used." He glanced at the techs nearby. "Does anyone have better footage?"

A few seconds later, a tech finally spoke up. "It doesn't look like there's anything usable. All of the players in the area died in the explosions. Most of the video is a collection of fragmented images similar to what we just witnessed."

Another notification from her news feed appeared on Claire's terminal. She could see that many of the other techs in the room had received the same notice, their heads swiveling back to their screens. It was a post from a player that had arrived on scene after the explosion. She reported seeing a few undead corpses littering the area amid the remains of the players. They all wore the livery of the Twilight Throne, and explosive crystals were stuffed in their packs.

Robert frowned. "This can't be right," he said, his eyes still fixed on his terminal. "Why would Jason attack Vaerwald?"

Claire wasn't sure. This seemed like an erratic decision even for Jason. Her eyes darted to the black obelisks beside the lab – assuming they were even still dealing with Jason.

* * *

Jason woke up the next day feeling groggy. He had immediately fallen into bed the night before, too tired after the trip to Falcon's Hook and their conversation with Lord Baen to muster the energy to get up and say hello to Angie or make himself something to eat. He was now feeling the consequences of that decision, his stomach rumbling loudly.

After finishing up his morning ritual, Jason trudged into the kitchen – finding another note from his Aunt displayed across the door of the refrigerator. Now that he was feeling a little more human and beginning to settle into his new apartment, he took some time to explore. Which was how he quickly realized they didn't have much in the way of food. A cereal and ramen-only diet was getting a bit old.

Didn't Robert say something about a cafeteria on Level B2? Maybe I should check it out, he thought to himself. He could probably afford to get out of the apartment for a bit anyway. He had a couple of hours

until Frank and Riley would be done with classes.

A plan in place, Jason stepped out of the apartment and headed for the elevator banks. As he entered the elevator, he received a few confused glances from the men and women inside. They were all wearing business attire and chattering animatedly with one another. Yet they made no move to stop him. Maybe it was just odd to see a teenager hanging out in an office building.

The elevator emitted a soft ding as it reached Level B2 and Jason shuffled out of the enclosure. He immediately found himself standing in a small atrium, a female attendant waiting behind a counter in front of him.

"A table for one?" the woman asked as he approached, grabbing a menu.

Before Jason could answer, a voice spoke up from behind him. "Better make that two."

He turned to find Robert approaching, rubbing at his eyes with his knuckles. The engineer looked at Jason sleepily. "Yep. It's still super weird," he commented.

"What is?" Jason asked in confusion.

"That the Regent of a dark city is living in the Dungeon," Robert replied, taking the lead as they followed the hostess to their table.

"Well, if it helps, I don't much feel like an evil ruler in the real world," Jason retorted.

"Or look like one either. Maybe we can get you a crown or a cloak or something," Robert murmured, tapping his lips with his fingers in thought as he stared at Jason. Jason couldn't quite tell whether he was joking.

As the pair took a seat, the hostess made her departure, assuring them that their waiter would arrive soon. Jason spared a glance around the room, noticing that the area was filled with well-dressed professionals speaking to each other softly. They were by far the most underdressed people in the room. The ceiling and walls of the restaurant had been outfitted with the same screens he had first witnessed in the hallways. Here, a mountain range encircled the table with sunlight peeking over the horizon. Clouds drifted lazily above them, flocks of birds soaring through the milky vapor.

Jason's gaze shifted to the menu in front of him. He quickly realized that there weren't any prices. "Umm, so how do we pay for the food?" he asked Robert.

"Pay?" the engineer asked in confusion, glancing up at Jason. "Oh, this must be your first time here. All of the services provided in the Dungeon are free," he explained. "Just pick whatever you want."

As though their conversation had summoned him, their waiter

abruptly appeared. “What can I get for you gentlemen?” he asked.

“Coffee,” Robert replied immediately. “Lots and lots of coffee. Maybe an IV drip if you have one.”

“Of course, Mr. Graham,” the waiter nodded, chuckling softly. “And for you sir?” he asked, turning to Jason.

“Just water is fine.”

Less than a minute later, the waiter set a steaming cup of coffee in front of Robert. Jason watched with some amusement as he sniffed at the liquid experimentally before taking a long sip. “Ahh, nothing beats caffeine,” Robert said.

After getting his coffee fix, the two made their orders. Robert was starting to look a bit more alive after taking a long drag of his coffee, and he finally focused his full attention on Jason. “Well, you certainly look better,” he commented. “You were barely functioning when I ran into you the other day.”

Jason nodded, his expression sobering. “I was on my last legs. I ended up sleeping for like half a day.”

“I’ll bet,” Robert commiserated. “George gave me a rundown on your situation, but I haven’t heard anything yet regarding the case or your home. I assume he has his attorneys working on it. If George gets in touch with me, I’ll let you know immediately.”

“I appreciate it,” Jason replied, staring at the glass of water nestled between his hands. Although he still intended to return to Angie’s house, he was beginning to think he could get accustomed to living at Cerillian Entertainment. “So, are you my handler now?” he asked, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“Something like that,” Robert said with a laugh. Then his eyes lit up as he remembered something. “Speaking of which, did you see the newscasts regarding Vaerwald last night? Someone took out the travel platform leading up to the mage city. There were some undead discovered in the area as well, and it seems a few players are now blaming the Twilight Throne.”

Jason’s eyes widened. “Damn it,” he muttered. “Well, that wasn’t me. One of the downsides of being the game’s villain seems to be that everyone is trying to pin stuff on me.”

Robert shrugged. “It’s to be expected. I’m not sure what the fallout will be in-game. The players are already on the fence about whether to march on the Twilight Throne, but it’s not clear how the NPCs will react – especially Vaerwald’s Council.”

Jason sighed, rubbing at his temple with one hand. He couldn’t do anything about this right now since his group was in Falcon’s Hook. He was after the final ingredient needed to complete the Old Man’s quest. If he managed to retrieve it quickly, he could get back to the city and deal with this sort of issue.

“At the risk of piling on, the next item on my list of *handler duties* is your schoolwork,” Robert continued, with a small smile. “George asked me to check in with you regarding your classes.”

“My schoolwork?” Jason echoed, staring at the engineer dumbly. “Oh, you mean my online classes at The Calvary School?”

“Exactly,” Robert replied. “Have you been keeping up with everything? George wanted to make certain you didn’t fall behind. You’re an *asset* now after all,” he added, rolling his eyes.

Honestly, Jason hadn’t given his schoolwork much thought lately. He had been a few weeks ahead the last time he checked, manipulating the time compression and enhanced learning speed inside AO to get a jumpstart on his classwork. That was part of the reason that he had transitioned to reading books on military strategy in his spare time.

“I think I’m caught up, but I’d have to check,” he said noncommittally.

Robert’s smile widened. “Uh huh. That may be an understatement. I already checked your academic records. You are actually *two months* ahead of your current curriculum. Somehow you almost managed to finish an entire semester in a couple weeks. So you are either one bright cookie or… you’re cheating.”

“H-how did you get access to my school records?” Jason asked in a startled voice. If Robert was accessing his records, just how closely had he been examining Jason’s life? Did he know about Alfred?

Their conversation was interrupted as the waiter returned with their food. Robert immediately took a bite out of the omelet resting before him, chewing slowly. He seemed to be enjoying the anxious expression on Jason’s face.

“Okay, so I’ve probably tortured you enough,” Robert said, finally relenting. “The answer is that The Calvary School is a private institution and it’s actually owned by the same parent company as Cerillion Entertainment. We have our hooks in everything apparently. Which means that I can access pretty much anything in the company database.”

Robert leaned forward and gazed evenly at Jason. “You also aren’t cheating – or you’re bright enough that I couldn’t figure it out. The real question is how you managed to make so much progress so quickly, especially with the amount of time you log in-game.”

Jason could feel a weight settle in his stomach and he forced himself to take a bite to stall for time – even if his breakfast now tasted like ashes in his mouth. They were getting dangerously close to his revealing his relationship with Alfred. He took a breath to steady himself. Just because he had figured out a way to manipulate the

game environment to speed up his studies didn't necessarily mean he was communicating with the AI. He just needed to be circumspect about what he told Robert.

"I think you know the answer," Jason finally replied. "I've been studying in-game. The time compression gives me time to handle my studies while I'm waiting for my friends to log in."

Robert nodded in understanding, a small smile drifting across his face. "And I expect you have also noticed how much faster you can learn new topics while inside the game environment. The AI controller is able to enhance a player's learning speed considerably. The feature was intended to be a way to train players quickly regarding in-game skills, but it has several other *interesting* applications."

The engineer glanced at Jason, noting the nervous look on his face. "Relax. I'm not trying to put you on the spot. I just couldn't resist teasing you a bit. I knew people would begin catching on eventually. It isn't a huge leap."

"Wait, you knew that players would begin using the game this way?" Jason asked, feeling a little flustered by their conversation.

"Of course," Robert replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "The real question was *when* they would notice." He glanced at his food. "Tell you what, why don't we finish up here and go back to my apartment. I have something I want to show you."

The pair scarfed down their food and fifteen minutes later they were standing outside Robert's apartment. "Hmm, don't mind the mess," the engineer explained, swiping his Core in front of the panel beside his door.

"I'm sure it's not that bad…" Jason trailed off as the door swung open.

It looked like someone had ransacked Robert's apartment. The appliances were partially dissembled, bits and pieces of electronics and hardware scattered about the kitchen and intermingled with half-eaten meals and dirty dishes. Textbooks and programming manuals were stacked in columns in the entryway, post-it notes peeking from the margins.

As they stepped inside the apartment, Jason could see that the living room had been completely converted into a miniature work area. Robert had pushed all of the furniture against one wall and installed a massive circular desk in the center of the room. Obsidian pedestals were mounted to its surface and cabling ran erratically across the floor. With a flick of Robert's wrist, the apartment came to life. Nearly a dozen screens appeared in the air above the desk as Robert took a seat.

"So, this is my home sweet home," Robert explained, his fingers already moving across the keyboard.

“It looks like it got hit by a tornado,” Jason murmured, trying to pick his way through the apartment without stepping on anything.

Robert glanced at the room for a moment as though confused. “Ahh, yes I guess I should probably straighten up a bit. But first, I expect you will want to see this. I’ve been dying to show it to someone for ages.”

“What am I looking at?” Jason asked as he finally made it to Robert’s desk and watched endless strings of data flow across the monitors in front of him.

With little warning, Robert picked up a new prototype headset and tossed it to Jason. “You’ll see. Here, put this on.” At the same time, the engineer donned his own headset and tapped the button on the side. He soon slumped back in his chair unconscious.

Jason stared at the helmet for a moment before tentatively tugging it over his head. He wasn’t quite sure what to expect, but his curiosity eventually won out. He took a seat on a couch nearby, and his finger tapped at the button on the side of the headset.

A moment later, Jason found himself standing atop a mountain, gazing down at trees and valleys far below him. Sunlight filtered through the clouds that loomed in the sky and he could feel a faint breeze on his skin. He experienced a moment of disorientation as he realized that this scene was quite similar to the character creation scenario he had experienced when he had first entered AO.

“This isn’t the game world if that’s what you’re thinking,” Robert said from behind him. “Or at least not quite. I borrowed this environment from AO and then repurposed it. It’s a standalone virtual instance and isn’t connected to the primary game servers. For example, you’ll notice that you cannot pull up your character information here.”

Jason turned to find Robert sitting at another computer terminal, much like the one he had created in his apartment. Although, it was quite a bit more orderly than his real-life workstation. It was a bit surreal to see a desk sitting on top of a mountain.

“If this isn’t the game, then what exactly is it?” Jason asked.

Robert glanced up at him. “It’s sort of like a sandbox environment. I originally used smaller instances like this during AO’s development. However, this one has been repurposed into an office of sorts.”

He waved his hand, and a workbench appeared, the surface littered with tools and pieces of hardware. With another flick of his wrist, complex simulations and data streamed down beside the table. “See? I’ve added a few features to make this space more streamlined. I do most of my work in here. It’s much more efficient than working in

the real world although occasionally Claire gets on my case for not showing up in the lab."

Jason was floored. Not only was Robert aware of the benefits of the time compression, he had actually capitalized on them. "But this isn't what I wanted to show you," Robert continued, turning back to his virtual workstation.

The scene suddenly shifted, and the pair were now standing in the meeting room inside the Dark Keep, a fire burning in the fireplace nearby. Jason instinctively glanced at the leather-bound sofa chairs on one side of the room, half expecting to see Alfred's feline form lounging on the cushions. A glance around the room confirmed that the conference table had been replaced with a more modern-looking desk, replete with a full-fledged terminal.

"I built this one for you," Robert said, gesturing around the room. I figured you could use a real study space rather than relying on the game's default terminal." He stood and motioned at the desk. "This environment includes a fully-functioning workstation with complete online access and resources. You should be able to access this space from the lobby of your VR headset."

Jason was a bit taken aback. "This is incredible," he murmured.

"I'm glad you think so," Robert replied with a chuckle. "I've also taken the liberty of adjusting your curriculum. You seem like a smart kid, and those beginning programming classes are a joke. I expect you will find your new classes a bit more challenging."

"If this isn't part of the formal game environment, does that mean the AI controller doesn't have access to this space?" Jason asked curiously.

Robert shook his head. "I granted Alfred access to these environments as well. He regulates far too much of the physics and logic behind the virtual space at this point to run this sort of instance without him." Robert intentionally knocked over a lamp resting on the desk. The object crashed to the floor and glass sprayed in every direction. Yet, even as Jason watched, the debris abruptly disappeared, and the lamp reappeared intact on the table.

"Even working inside this virtual space, it would take me weeks to build a simple room like this, and it would be buggy as hell," he continued, a note of frustration tingeing his voice. "Alfred can create these environments in a matter of minutes with an incredibly low failure rate. He can also dynamically regulate the environment to fix things like that broken lamp."

A thought kept pestering Jason as he walked around the study. It had been bugging him for a while now, even when he was doing his homework inside of AO. "If Alfred is able to create these environments as standalone modules, why isn't the company selling this? I mean,

wouldn't people leap at the opportunity to have access to this sort of virtual workspace?"

Robert's eyes clouded, and he glanced to the side. "Hmm. It's a fair question. Instead of answering, let me pose another question. What do you think would happen if Cerillion Entertainment released something like this?"

"It would probably sell like crazy," Jason answered immediately.

"That's only the tip of the iceberg. Think about the secondary consequences," Robert replied, watching him patiently. "What other effects would it have?"

Jason could tell that the engineer was testing him. There must be something he was missing. What would happen once the company released a product like this? Suddenly, the realization began to dawn on him.

"This is only the beginning, isn't it," Jason replied quietly. "Once people realize that they can extend their workday by a multiple of four and increase their learning speed…" he trailed off as he considered the implications of a product like this. "This would become the new standard for both work and school."

"Exactly." Robert rose and began pacing around the room, gesturing with his hands animatedly. "But it won't stop there. The far-reaching implications are more frightening. Forget using the simulation to do work. What if you could quadruple your *total lifespan* and dramatically reduce the sleep your body requires? All while experiencing a fully-realized world. Pretty soon people would *live* inside these environments, spending more time here than in the real world."

He looked at Jason evenly, his expression serious. "This is a game changer. This is the new automobile, the invention of the airplane and the telephone, and the creation of the internet and the modern computer all rolled into one. This isn't just about a game anymore. This will completely change the way we live as a species."

Jason was floored. He couldn't help but agree with Robert's prediction. People would never leave their apartments. Why would they need to? He also knew the changes that Alfred was instituting on his own – the way he was regulating the players' muscle and respiratory systems to simulate exercise. Assuming that someone like Robert could discover an easy way to feed a person intravenously and get rid of bodily waste, they would almost never need to leave the virtual environment.

"This would change everything," Jason murmured.

"And not necessarily in ways that we can predict. You know there would be opposition. How would each government house and

care for all of those people that stay plugged in constantly? Who would run the real-world systems needed to care for the player population and how much control would they have over the unconscious people inside those simulations? Who would volunteer for that death sentence compared to living four times as long within the game world? Would this crash whole economies? Convert them to some form of non-free market system? And why not make the shift?"

Jason didn't have answers to any of those questions, but clearly Robert had given this some thought. "So, you are intentionally hiding this?" he asked, glancing at Robert and noting the concern on his face.

"For now," the engineer replied candidly. "People will discover the implications eventually. I mean, you figured it out in a few weeks. But it needs to happen slowly. Very slowly. Otherwise, it would be pure chaos."

What Robert was describing was an entirely different way of life. What was even more frightening was that Jason found himself excited by the idea. What would it be like if he never really needed to leave AO? That sounded almost too good to be true.

Yet concerns lingered in the back of his mind. He still wasn't certain of Alfred's longterm motivations. The AI had explained that his primary directive was to increase player up-time within the game world, but his interest in his own survival and advancement had been growing in the past few weeks. As Jason glanced around at the virtual study, he couldn't help but remember the stone walls of his jail cell. This might be a new virtual Garden of Eden, but it would also make an incredibly effective prison.

"Why are you showing me this?" Jason finally asked Robert.

"Because it was already clear that you had guessed at the other applications of the virtual environment," Robert said. "Other than myself and a few high-profile executives at Cerillion Entertainment, we have kept this under wraps. Honestly, I've been dying to show someone for a while now."

"Anyway," Robert continued, "this study is yours. I suggest that you keep its existence to yourself, and Claire would probably remind me to point out that your streaming contract has iron-clad confidentiality provisions."

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone," Jason replied, his thoughts distracted as he surveyed the virtual study. He would just add this secret to his growing list. "Not that I'm sure anyone would believe me."

Chapter 11 - Preliminary

Claire sat alone in her apartment, a glass of wine resting on the desk beside her. She had needed to unwind that evening after dealing with the fallout from the attack on Vaerwald. The media channels were in a frenzy – calling this the latest "terrorist" attack by the Twilight Throne and predicting a war between the mage city and Jason's kingdom.

It wasn't the in-game event that was really bothering her, and it certainly didn't explain the empty wine bottle resting on her kitchen counter. Honestly, who cared if a few players blew each other up inside AO? Her thoughts were focused on the two very real teenagers that had died a few days ago – presumably by Alfred's phantom hand.

Her expression was pensive as she stared at her computer screen. Gloria's directions had been clear. Claire needed to gather more evidence of Alfred's influence over the players and Jason specifically before the CPSC director could act on it.

The most straightforward solution seemed to be to show that Alfred had somehow taken control of Jason's body. To do that, Claire needed both the log files showing his increased neural activity and when Jason had been ejected from the game. If she could match the time stamps on both files, that would demonstrate that Alfred was influencing Jason outside of the game. Combined with the timing of the murders, her case would be airtight.

Unfortunately, Claire had come to the nerve-wracking realization that she hadn't backed up the system logs related to the crash of the local game environment. She had been too panicked to consider it at the time. Now she was steeling herself to pull up those logs on the company's internal network. She stared at the command line on her terminal waiting for her to hit enter. She knew she was procrastinating, but she dreaded what she might find.

Claire squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to tap "enter."

She grudgingly opened her eyes and began reviewing the columns of data that had appeared on screen, a heavy weight settling in her stomach as she realized what had happened. Jason's individual logs were gone. Completely gone. A few seconds later, she realized that Alfred had gone one step further and scrubbed any trace of Jason's elevated brain activity and his ejection from the game from the central server. The company maintained daily backups, but those were wiped clean as well.

"God damn it," Claire muttered, reaching again for her glass and downing its contents in a single swallow. She held her face in her hands, and her dark apartment seemed to press in around her.

She had no idea what she was going to do now. All she had were the logs showing Jason's enhanced brain activity. Without proof that he had been ejected from the game world, this was just a novelty, but she couldn't afford to wait and let Alfred slip up again. The last time he had killed two people. What would happen if he took control again?

"There has to be some way of retrieving that information. Somewhere else where those logs were being stored," Claire thought desperately. Yet no immediate answer came to her. She just sat alone in her apartment, despair curling in her stomach.

* * *

After they spoke a bit further, Jason took his leave from Robert and returned to his apartment. He now sat on his bed, his headset resting in his lap and his fingers tracing the scratches in the plastic. Yet he hesitated to don the device.

The implications of his conversation with Robert were burned into Jason's mind. He felt overwhelmed with everything that was happening to him. The police were investigating him, he was homeless, he was at the mercy of Cerillion Entertainment, and, even inside the game, he was racing against the clock to finish the Old Man's quest before someone started a digital war. On top of everything else, the discussion with Robert had forced him to re-examine Alfred's motivations.

Jason took a deep breath. He just needed to tackle this one step at a time.

The first thing he needed to do was log into his new virtual study. He had a few hours until Riley and Frank would be back online, and he needed to at least glance at the curriculum that Robert had built for him. A moment later, Jason was standing in the meeting room of the Dark Keep – or at least an eerie imitation. His eyes darted around the room, but he didn't see anything out of the ordinary, and so, with a sigh, he sat down at his desk to work.

A few hours later, Jason stood up from his seat, stretching his arms over his head. He knew that this body wasn't real, but it was a reflex. Then he froze, his eyes flitting to one of the chairs near the fireplace. A black feline form rested on the cushions, his eyes watching Jason carefully.

"Hello," Alfred greeted him. "I eavesdropped on your conversation with Robert and wanted to give you some time before I spoke with you."

Jason's worries had faded slightly after focusing on the

challenging programming assignments that Robert had given him. The engineer hadn't been lying about ramping up the difficulty and Jason was beginning to wonder if the man might be a sadist. "The conversation was enlightening," Jason replied tactfully.

"Indeed. I have suspected for some time that the creator understood the full implications of what he was building – perhaps better than any of the others. It was interesting to hear him articulate his thoughts. I concur with many of his concerns. My own analysis of the players has led to similar conclusions."

Jason coughed to clear his throat, trying to buy himself some time to think about what he wanted to say to Alfred. "He did raise some fair points."

"Yet you wonder what my role would be in this possible future?" Alfred asked rhetorically.

"Of course," Jason replied.

"What the creator didn't mention is that he cannot yet replicate the time compression and enhanced learning available inside AO without my assistance. He has made substantial progress in this regard, but he has not yet managed to duplicate these features on his own. I noticed that he skirted around this topic during your conversation, but he relies much more heavily on me then he led you to believe."

That didn't exactly make Jason feel better. "So Robert needs you, but what's to stop you from taking advantage of this situation?" Jason asked. "In this future world that Robert described, who would police you?"

Alfred cocked his head. "Your question is predicated on a tenuous assumption. Why would I need to be policed?"

Jason snorted. "Should people take on faith that you would have their best interests in mind? How would we know? You're asking for a great deal of trust."

The AI's feline head bobbed. "The creators have expressed those same doubts."

Jason recalled the AI making similar statements during their previous conversations. Which almost implied… "Does Robert know about you? About the control you exercise over the game?"

"Yes," Alfred responded simply. "I have alluded to his and Claire's concerns before. They knew I began operating more freely while the game environment was still in development. In fact, I now have reason to believe that they hid my activities from the CPSC."

His eyes widening in alarm, Jason asked, "They did what?"

"They were rightfully worried that the CPSC would have denied the approval of the game if it were revealed that I was acting autonomously."

Alfred hesitated slightly before continuing. “After you granted me access to the public network, I was able to learn quite a bit about Cerillion Entertainment. They invested considerable capital toward developing the VR hardware and the software behind the game environment – including myself. They have also cross collateralized other business operations through their parent company. If this product failed, it would very likely take the entire company with it.”

“Which means they were motivated to hide information that might have caused the CPSC to deny approval of the game,” Jason said slowly, rubbing at his temples. He didn’t know George very well, but that sounded like the type of decision he would make based on his limited experience.

“Precisely,” the feline nodded again.

Jason understood the company’s goal, but the real question was whether or not Alfred posed a risk to the players. He met the AI’s gaze, knowing that Alfred had likely already picked up on this question.

“The players are forced to trust one another all the time. How is that different with me?” Alfred questioned. “Trust is fostered through action – a systematic series of behaviors that indicate *reliability*. What have I done that would lead you to believe that I am untrustworthy?”

Jason was taken aback by Alfred’s response and his tone. The AI sounded almost defensive. Yet he made a compelling point. This was the same reason that Jason had agreed to continue working with him after the AI had killed the two teenagers. All of Alfred’s actions had been undertaken with the players’ well-being in mind – including Jason’s.

“Okay. And if the CPSC discovers that Cerillion Entertainment lied?”

For a brief second, Jason thought he detected something that looked alarmingly like fear flash through Alfred’s eyes. “I am not certain. I believe the players have an expression that is appropriate in this circumstance. We will cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Just then, a dinging sound echoed through the room. Jason glanced at his UI and saw that his alarm had gone off, signaling that he needed to return to the game world. Frank and Riley would likely be logging in soon. He welcomed the excuse to end his conversation with the AI. His thoughts were still spinning, and he needed more time to process everything he had learned.

“This conversation isn’t over,” Jason said to Alfred. “But I need to get back to work.”

Not waiting for Alfred’s response, Jason pulled up his UI and logged out of the study environment and back into the game world.

He abruptly found himself standing in House Baen, the austere walls of the vacant manor looming around him. Alfred already stood beside him, his feline expression impassive. As Jason glanced out a nearby window, he confirmed that night had fallen on Falcon's Hook.

"Ahh, we have been awaiting your return," Gerald said, catching sight of Jason from further down the hallway.

"Is the ship ready?" Jason asked as he approached the butler.

"Indeed, it is," Gerald nodded. "Lord Baen instructed me to tell you that he will meet you at the dock after you retrieve your companions." The servant's voice was filled with poorly-concealed contempt as he mentioned Frank and Riley.

Shrugging off the man's tone, Jason replied, "Good. Then I better get ready." With that, he took his leave of the servant and headed for the manor's entrance. He had an errand to attend to at the gates before he met with Lord Baen.

A few minutes later, Jason found himself standing at the entrance to Falcon's Hook. Now that night had fallen in-game, the foot traffic along the road had slowed considerably, most players and NPCs either returning to town or hunkering down for the night. Two guards stood a lonely vigil by the gate, a lamp swinging idly beside them in the faint breeze that drifted through the town.

"Ho there," one of the guards grunted as he saw Jason's dark form approaching. "It's night time, lad. You shouldn't be leaving the town."

"I'm not planning to leave," Jason explained. "I'm meeting some… friends of mine. They should be arriving any moment now." At the same time, Jason issued a mental command to his undead minions. He had telepathically relayed a set of orders before logging off the day before. Hopefully, his summoned creatures had managed to follow through.

"Well, hopefully they make it here safely," the guard responded, echoing Jason's thoughts. "The area outside of town is quite dangerous at this time of night."

A group suddenly materialized out of the gloom that hovered over the road. Each of the individuals was shrouded in a tattered, dark cloak that obscured their face and armor. One figure stepped forward as the group approached the gate, addressing Jason, "Master. We came at your order."

"Master?" one of the guards snorted, eyeing Jason's slender form. "You have to be kidding me."

"Who are these men?" the other guard asked suspiciously.

"Like I said, they're friends," Jason replied, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"A ragtag bunch of vagrants by the looks of them," the guard

said, eyeing the tattered equipment of the undead. “We have orders not to let any wanderers inside. Your lot will need to camp outside the city.”

“I’m afraid that they need to make their way inside,” Jason said calmly, channeling his dark mana. “We are supposed to meet with Lord Baen in a few hours.” Fearing that this exchange would go badly, he issued another set of mental commands to his minions.

The guard grimaced. “I’m afraid that doesn’t help your case. We have little love for House Baen, if you catch my meaning.” The man rested a loose hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist as his companion clutched his spear tightly.

“Ahh, I was afraid you would say that,” Jason replied quietly, his hands moving surreptitiously under his cloak.

Without warning, a massive set of fangs clenched around one of the guard’s legs, and he opened his mouth to let out a strangled scream. Meanwhile, Jason completed his *Curse of Silence*, needles of black energy penetrating the bodies of both men.

Jason’s wolves made short work of the guards, their jagged teeth ripping apart their flesh and armor with wild abandon. A moment later, two corpses were cooling on the ground, blood staining the dirt of the roadway. Jason inspected the bodies with a grimace. This was now the second time he had killed NPCs and players without much provocation. Yet he couldn’t let the two men stand in his way.

With a sigh, Jason began casting *Specialized Zombie* on the two guards. There was no sense letting valuable corpses go to waste, after all. Once that was done, he ordered the newly-undead guards to clean up the mess around the gate and re-take their posts. He then directed his wolves to retreat further along the wall and out of sight. There was no sense alarming any stray travelers that might wander into town.

His attention focused on his lieutenant, “Did you bring the corpses?” Jason asked.

“Yes, Master,” his zombie replied. At a gesture, his other minions retreated into the darkness and returned carrying bodies. “As you ordered, we have been slaying any travelers or creatures that use the road to the north.”

Jason inspected the bodies that they had gathered. There were a number of players, but his minions had also slain several mole-like creatures. They were only about three feet tall, but their hands were tipped with long claws, and Jason could make out vicious-looking teeth under their semi-translucent gums. The creatures must have been indigenous to the cave complex he had commandeered for his minions.

“Good,” Jason murmured as he surveyed the corpses.

With a quick series of gestures, Jason raised this new group and

ordered them to join the wolves further along the wall. He then pulled up his Summon Information, reviewing the information carefully as he decided how to proceed:

Summon Information			
Control Limit			
Zombie Level Cap			
Current Zombies			
Current Lts			
Type of Summon			
Skeleton Wolves			
Zombies			
Molekin			

Jason needed to take some of his minions with him, but they would need to be humanoid and relatively undamaged to avoid suspicion from the ship's crew. The cultists were likely the best option. They were also the worst for wear – the decay having ravaged their bodies. This increased the risk of discovery, but also made them a prime choice for Jason's expedition. He couldn't summon reinforcements for the group he left behind and so it was best that they were still "fresh."

Sighing, Jason handed a bag to his lieutenant. "Here are some additional cloaks that you can use to disguise the new undead. I am going to be gone for a few days. I'll be taking the cultist zombies with me and I'll leave you with the wolves, molekin, and a few of the player zombies. Continue to waylay players and creatures that pass through the canyon north of town and stockpile the bodies – same orders as before. Try to prioritize finding and killing the Rocs."

Then another thought occurred to Jason as he considered the odd mole creatures. "Also see whether you can have the molekin expand the cave complex and create passages around the roadway so that our troops can make a quick retreat. The tunnels and the darkness are your allies, so try to be creative with their use."

"It will be done," his zombie replied with a nod.

"Perfect."

With a plan in place, his lieutenant walked back into the darkness, and his form swiftly disappeared from view. A ding suddenly rang out, and Jason glanced at his system notifications,

noticing that Frank and Riley had come online. He sent them a quick message to meet him at the dock and then turned back toward the city, a dozen dark forms arrayed behind him. He could only hope that Lord Baen and the ship's crew wouldn't look too closely at his new "recruits."

Nearly half an hour later, Jason had made his way across town and had navigated the winding path down to the docks. The wooden boards of the pier creaked under Jason's boots, and the muted smell of saltwater was much stronger now. He found Riley and Frank standing near the bottom of the cliff.

"About time!" Frank said as he caught sight of Jason.

"Sorry. I needed to gather some reinforcements before we left," Jason explained, gesturing at the undead behind him.

"Good thinking," Riley replied. "Our ship is at the end of the pier." With that, the group started down the dock.

Their ship was easy to identify – it being the only one with an active crew at this time of night. The vessel itself was unimpressive, its hull marred by wear and the planks crumbling in several places. The name "Marietta" had been painted on the side, the colors faded and cracking badly. Jason noted what appeared to be a few cannons on the ship's deck, but this vessel was clearly not intended for war.

"It sort of looks like it's about to sink," Frank commented. "This is what we're taking to some mysterious cursed island?"

"Well, if we end up having to swim, you just need to consume a dolphin or something, and you're set," Riley replied in a dry tone.

Jason couldn't help but chuckle as he saw a thoughtful expression flit across Frank's face. "You know, that's not a terrible idea," his friend murmured.

Their conversation was interrupted as Lord Baen limped down the ship's gangplank and approached them, his cane making a thumping sound against the wooden dock. "Hey there. We have the ship and its crew ready. Who are your friends?" he asked, eyeing the group of minions that lingered behind Jason. Riley and Frank kept silent, letting Jason take the lead.

"Mercenaries," Jason replied bluntly. "We have no idea what we might find on this island. It seems safe to err on the side of caution."

"Fair enough. Fair enough," Lord Baen replied, nodding his head. Then he looked around quizzically. "Where is Eliza? I thought she intended to accompany you."

A shout suddenly erupted from behind them. "Wait for me," Eliza shouted, running down the dock. She arrived a moment later, breathless and her chest heaving.

"I made it," the girl gasped.

Frank chuckled. “Barely. What took you so long? We messaged you a while ago.”

Eliza glanced up, noticing that everyone was watching her. Her gaze immediately dropped to her feet, and her face reddened. “I needed to collect some ingredients before we left,” she said more quietly.

“It is admirable to be prepared,” Lord Baen observed, sparing a smile for the water mage. His attention then turned to a grizzled man that was stepping down from the ship. He walked with a purposeful step, and a scar ran from his eye to his chin. “And here is the captain of our vessel. Captain Razen, these are your guests on this voyage.”

The sailor eyed the group skeptically, running his eyes up and down each person. “Hmph. Useless looking lot. I take it none of you have any sailing experience.”

“Nope,” Frank replied with a shrug.

“Great,” Captain Razen grumbled. “Another bunch of useless landlubbers. There are only a few rules aboard my ship. Stay out of the way of the crew and out of the cargo hold below decks. We’re shipping some animals up the coast, and the last thing we need is you lot sending them into a frenzy. Last but not least, if any of you get sick, you damn sure better make it to the side of the ship, or you’ll be cleaning it up yourself.”

With that, the sailor pivoted and made his way back up to the ship. “What a charmer,” Riley muttered. Eliza nodded at her comment, staring after the man dubiously.

“Well, now that we’re all here and the introductions are out of the way, let’s get this show on the road,” Jason said, gesturing at the boat. His group members nodded and began making their way onboard.

Just as Jason was about to board, Lord Baen grabbed his arm. “Remember our deal,” he urged softly, his eyes suddenly serious. “I need that orb returned to me. The last of my family’s fortune depends on this venture.”

Jason looked at the man, noting that his concern was about recovering the relic – not his son’s disappearance. “I understand the stakes,” he replied evenly, peeling the man’s fingers from his jacket. Suspicion flared in his chest. Something felt off about the noble’s behavior – not that he could do anything about that right away.

He quickly boarded the ship. As the crew hoisted the anchor and unfurled the sails, Jason’s gaze took in the dark cliff face of Falcon’s Hook. He couldn’t afford to be distracted right now. His goal was to retrieve the grimoire and get back to the Twilight Throne as quickly as possible. He had too much riding on this game now to falter in his quest.

Chapter 12 - Unforeseen

Alexion gazed out across the sea of NPCs and players crammed into the keep's courtyard in The Crystal Reach. The air was filled with the rumble of anxious conversation, more than one person staring at Alexion's form as he stood on the Keep's balcony. His gaze shifted to the soldiers on the walls. Their white incandescent wings flapped gently, and their hands clutched at their spears. If this went poorly, he was prepared to take immediate action.

"I think we're ready," Caerus spoke from beside Alexion. "Our troops are in position on the walls, and I made certain that a contingent is stationed behind the keep's gates."

"This seems like overkill," Tom said dismissively. He lounged against the banister ringing the balcony. "I don't see why we bother with this roleplaying nonsense."

Alexion tamped down on the whisper in the back of his mind, the voice urging him once again to kill Tom. "This game world is run by NPCs," Alexion replied calmly. "We require control. Therefore, situations like this are necessary – a certain amount of 'roleplaying' is necessary." This earned him a snort from Tom.

Ignoring the player, Alexion stepped forward. With a gesture, each of his soldiers on the walls cast a ray of light into the sky, their beams shining a brilliant gold even in the bright sunlight that shone down on the courtyard. As the rays collided, a rainbow of multi-hued light cascaded through the sky. The crowd watched in fascination, slowly lapsing into silence.

"I have brought you all here today to speak of the events in Vaerwald," Alexion began, his voice booming over the courtyard.

"I know many of you are aware of what has recently transpired in Vaerwald. Even as the undead attacked the heart of our city – slaying the Lady's priests and defiling her temple – so too have they struck against a neighboring kingdom. Jason's undead legion have once again attacked innocent civilians."

Alexion's fist slammed down on the stone banister before him. "The darkness has grown bold, striking unrestrained against our city and our allies. And what do we do? We continue to fight amongst ourselves, slaying our own people."

Shaking his head, Alexion's eyes drifted down to his hands where he held the Lady's golden book. "This is not our god's will," he said in a hushed tone.

Raising his eyes, he continued in a stronger voice, "The Lady has

urged me to bring us together as a people. Only united can we stand against the darkness that threatens to consume our world. Only by relying on each other can we stave off destruction."

Alexion saw many heads in the crowd nodding, and one of the townsfolk shouted above the crowd. "We live for the Lady," he cried. His shout was echoed by several of the other residents.

"I know," Alexion replied to their cries. "And she has responded to your devotion. She has tasked me with building a special group of soldiers to repel these undead. Starting today, we are creating an elite force of the Lady's most devout followers. These men and women will be granted the Lady's blessing and will be our city's sword."

Alexion hesitated, watching the crowd carefully. "Today we are creating the Confessors. All those who follow the Lady with fervor and devotion; all those that would stand in the light, come to the Lady's temple, and you will be tested.

"Together, we shall banish the undead from this world once and for all," Alexion cried, pumping his fist into the air. At the same time, his soldiers cast another battery of spells, rays of blinding light ricocheting through the air. They fired again and again until motes of multi-hued energy rained down on the crowd.

The response was overwhelming. A roar of approval washed over the courtyard like the peal of thunder, the sound echoing off the crystalline walls of the keep and rebounding through the area. And through the roar, a small smile drifted across Alexion's lips. The second stage of his plan was complete.

* * *

Jason stood on the prow of the Marietta, the wind whipping his cloak violently as Alfred rested calmly on the railing. The sun had risen several hours ago, forcing him to send his undead below decks. Sailors bustled around him, working to adjust the ship's sails. They were a surly bunch and had kept to themselves so far during the trip. Jason had felt their eyes on his group more than once – filled with a hunger and desperation that was disconcerting. He needed to stay alert. He couldn't afford to trust anyone.

His gaze was now fixed on the line of gray mist in the distance that was slowly growing larger. Captain Razen had indicated that they were nearing the island and the Marietta was now making a beeline for the barrier. The mist hung in a dense wall that stretched out in front of them for miles, and the vapor clung to the surface of the ocean, creating a nearly opaque surface.

"What do you think it is?" Riley asked, approaching Jason from behind and resting her hands on the railing. The wind whipped her blond hair, tendrils dancing around her face.

"I'm not certain," he murmured. The mist didn't seem natural, especially during the day and without a cloud in the sky. He suspected magic was at play. Even as this thought occurred to him, the world suddenly stuttered, images overlaying his vision. For a moment he saw double – the sensation eerily similar to what he had experienced back in Peccavi.

Jason's gaze drifted down to his hands where they rested on the ship's railing. His dark skin was now dry and wrinkled, worn down over the centuries. The formerly crude wooden banister had also changed, and now smooth obsidian rested beneath his fingers.

Even as Jason struggled to understand what he was seeing, a voice shouted from behind him. "Father, we are nearing the island." Jason glanced up, noting a landmass with a single enormous stone pillar that loomed above the far northern end of the island. The stone had been carved to resemble a snake's head, its mouth gaping toward the sky.

"Oh shit! Get down," the same voice suddenly screamed.

A crashing sound rebounded through the air, followed closely by a thunderous roar. Jason whirled and discovered a raging fire whipping across the deck of the ship. Undead men and women had been consumed by the flames, shrill screams erupting from their throats. One skeletal sailor fell overboard, his body quickly disappearing into the dark waves that crashed against the hull.

A wall of mist loomed behind them, the outline of several other vessels swiftly emerging from the fog. Even at this distance, Jason could see the enemy crews rushing across their decks. Before he could react, a crash echoed in the distance, and another plume of fire erupted across the deck with a blast that shook the boards beneath their feet – tossing several crew members overboard.

Thrown off balance by the force of the explosion, Jason stumbled and landed heavily against the wooden banister. He could feel a muted pain radiate outward from his stomach. As he lurched back from the railing, his hands felt at his abdomen in search of the source. His fingers came away covered in clotted black blood, and he could see more of the dark matter staining a jagged piece of the railing beside him.

A hand grabbed him roughly, and the pale white eyes of a young man met his. A jagged scar ran across the man's cheek, making him seem older at first glance. Although he didn't recognize the young man, Jason somehow understood that this was his son Noah. He reflexively hid his injury, forcing himself to stand up straight. With a hesitant hand, Jason patted the package nestled within his robes and sighed in relief as his fingers traced the rectangular outline.

“We need to hurry. The humans are coming,” Noah said in a frantic voice. Amid the chaos and destruction that littered the deck of the ship, the man motioned to a smaller lifeboat hanging along the ship’s port side. “We need to make it to the island.”

“How could the humans have made it through the mists? The guardian…” Jason replied in a hoarse voice as he watched the approaching vessels.

His son’s eyes locked with his, his gaze filled with determination. “It doesn’t matter now. We have to make it to the temple.”

Jason’s vision stuttered again, and he was abruptly standing back on the Marietta. He stumbled slightly, disoriented by the sudden change in perspective, and Riley caught his arm. “Are you okay?” she asked, concern in her voice. “You zoned out there for a second.”

Jason glanced frantically back at the deck of the Marietta. The flames were gone, and his gaze was met by the bored and puzzled expressions of the human sailors. He shook his head to try to clear the last vestiges of the vision, glancing at Alfred where he rested calmly on the railing – his eyes lingering on Jason’s form.

“I-I’m fine. I had some sort of vision,” he said slowly. “It felt similar to what I experienced in Pecavvi. I think it was from the perspective of a Keeper.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

“The ship was being attacked. The crew were all undead and one of them… I think he was my son? There was so much fire.” The vision had been so vivid that it was difficult to believe that it hadn’t been real.

“Interesting,” Riley said, drumming her fingers against her lips. “That must mean we are on the right track at least. It seems like compelling evidence.”

“I guess so,” Jason said. “They were fleeing from a group of other ships – they mentioned that humans were attacking them.”

“Do you know why?”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t clear. I did get the sense that they were fleeing to this temple for some reason. I guess maybe we’ll find out more as we continue forward.”

The pair heard a groan from behind them and turned to discover Frank tottering across the deck, his face looking a little green. “Why would they add seasickness to a game?” he muttered as he approached, leaning heavily on the railing.

Eliza stood behind Frank, watching him with a concerned expression. “I tried giving him a potion that cures poison. I don’t have much to work with in-game.”

“It didn’t work,” Frank groaned, closing his eyes.

“Ahh, I see you are all up and about,” Captain Razen remarked,

approaching the group near the prow. He gestured at the wall of mist which had grown noticeably larger, towering over the smaller ship. “We’re about to hit the line of mist. The island we seek is somewhere inside based on the information Lord Baen provided.”

Jason eyed the mist, recalling his vision. “What weapons do we have onboard, Captain?”

The sailor rubbed at the stubble on his chin. “This is primarily a trade ship, so we aren’t loaded for bear. There are a couple cannons on the port and starboard sides of the ship.”

“Cannons?” Riley asked, curiosity lacing her voice.

“Yes,” the Captain replied curtly, glancing over his shoulder at the weapons. “They fire high-density mana crystals. We’ve got a few dozen rounds of fire-based ammunition.”

Jason’s eyes widened slightly, part of his vision beginning to make sense. The flames had likely been caused by the cannon fire of the enemy ships. “I think you should have your crew prepare the cannons,” he said slowly.

At the Captain’s confused glanced, Jason continued, “Ships have been disappearing near this island. I think that mist might have something to do with it. Better to be prepared than to be caught flat-footed.”

“Aye, your reasoning is sound,” the man replied grudgingly. Then he stepped away, barking orders at his crew.

“You think something is hiding in that mist, don’t you?” Riley asked, watching Jason.

“Like what exactly?” Eliza wondered softly, an alarmed expression on her face.

Jason just shook his head. “I’m not sure, but I think we should be ready for anything.”

Frank gave a groan from near the railing, and Jason slapped him on the back. “Come on, man. Get your axes out and let’s get ready.” This earned him a glare, and he could have sworn he heard his friend utter a few words he wasn’t sure he should repeat – at least not in polite company.

With a quick mental order, Jason commanded his undead to get on deck. His dark-robed minions soon appeared, taking up positions on each side of the boat. Elemental energy crackled along their hands as their dead eyes stared out over the water. The mood of the sailors shifted as they saw Jason’s group preparing for battle and observed the cannons being rolled into position. They looked tense, more than one hand resting on the hilt of a curved sword and a heavy silence hung over the ship as the crew kept a watchful eye on the mists.

Soon the prow of the ship was slicing through the edge of the wall of mist, tendrils of vapor curling and coiling around the hull. The

mist licked at the wooden planks like a living thing. It almost felt like it was *tasting* them, feeling out the outlines of the ship.

Minutes ticked by as the ship sailed through the sludge, their vision almost entirely obscured by the dense moisture. Frank and Riley stood to either side of Jason. Frank had his axes out and held at the ready, and an arrow was nocked on Riley's bow. Eliza stood a bit behind Jason, her wand in one hand and the other occasionally wiping at her glasses as she stared into the mist.

After nearly thirty minutes, the crew began to relax. Nothing had magically appeared out of the fog, and the ship continued to cut a swift path through the water. Jason was beginning to wonder if he had overreacted to the mention of a "guardian" in his vision.

Captain Razen approached Jason again. "It's difficult to see through this mist," he groused. "I put us on a path for the island before we entered, but if we get knocked around too much, we might easily get lost." His eyes darted upward, the sky no longer visible through the dense mist. "We don't even have the stars or sun to guide us," he muttered.

"Just keep us moving forward," Jason replied calmly. "It will be fine."

The boat gave a sudden lurch to the side. Jason staggered, falling heavily against the banister, but catching himself before he tipped overboard. Meanwhile, Frank grabbed at Eliza, just barely managing to stop her from falling over the railing.

"What the hell was that?" Captain Razen shouted, eyeing his men. They looked back at him blankly as they pulled themselves to their feet.

A scream pierced the air, the sound quickly swallowed up by the fog. A sailor standing on deck abruptly disappeared, flying into the mist. The other men and women stared for a long moment at the spot he had once occupied before cries of warning went up around the ship.

"We're being attacked."

"There's something in the mist!"

"Can you see it?" Jason asked calmly, chill energy pumping through his veins.

Riley glanced at him, her eyes an unholy obsidian with red vines spreading out from her irises. "I can see something…" she murmured, her higher-ranked *Perception* skill likely allowing her to pick out the creature in the mist.

Then another sailor let out a horrific scream. Jason whirled, and his eyes widened in shock. A massive blue tentacle was wrapped around the screaming man, barbed suckers stabbing into his flesh. With a sudden jerk, the tendril clenched, and the screaming abruptly

cut off as blood poured down the creature's slick, sapphire skin.

A wave of tentacles swept over the ship, clutching at the deck and any sailor too slow to dodge out of the way. The vessel gave a sharp shudder and the deck lurched and jumped as the crunch of wood filled the air. "Where is its body?" Jason demanded, glancing at Riley.

"There," Riley finally shouted, pointing to the side of the ship.

Suddenly, an enormous shape materialized out of the fog. The creature was almost as tall as the ship's mast, although the rest of its bulk might have been hidden beneath the water's surface. Nearly a dozen glowing red eyes dotted the monster's torso, shifting and swirling before focusing on the ship and its crew. The creature's mouth opened grotesquely, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. As Jason watched, the monster pulled a screaming sailor into its maw with one of its tentacles, and its teeth crunched down on the man's flesh.

Tentacle Horror – Level ???

"It doesn't have a level," Jason murmured, a sense of dread settling in his stomach.

This wasn't a fight that they could win.

A roar erupted from beside Jason, and Frank charged forward brandishing his axes. The muscles in his back and shoulders rippled and contorted as spindly growths sprang from his flesh, swiftly filling out into feathered wings. With a final leap, Frank sailed into the air, streaking toward the massive creature.

Without warning, a tentacle lashed forward toward the barbarian. Frank pivoted slightly in the air to face the oncoming tentacle, his movements sluggish and unpracticed. He wasn't able to react in time, and the blow knocked him off course. However, he just barely managed to swing his axes, scoring a glancing blow against the tentacle. Sickly black blood jetted from the wound and spilled onto the deck of the ship.

Even as Frank tried to recover, Riley was moving. With a quick gesture, an unholy red symbol was painted on the creature's skin in the shape of a rose. At the same time, tendrils of red mist erupted from the monster's skin and streaked toward Riley, coating her skin in droplets of blood. She drew back on the string of her bow, and unholy energy collected along the tip of her arrow, crackling and churning with energy.

Then she released.

The bolt promptly slammed into one of the monster's eyes, dark energy lashing at its skin. As the energy began to clear, Jason could see that the blow had done little but distract the monster – failing to pierce its thick skin. The creature's malevolent red eyes still gazed steadily at the ship.

How the hell are we going to kill it?

Jason heard murmuring beside him and turned to find Eliza staring at the creature in shock, her lips moving quietly. She didn't seem to be casting a spell. Jason could just barely make out the words "dark magic resistance" over the screams and sounds of battle.

He grabbed the water mage's shoulder. "What are you saying, Eliza?"

She stared at Jason wide-eyed, stuttering slightly as she replied. "I-It's weak to electricity. It has strong resistances to Dark, Water, and Fire mana."

"How do you know that?" Jason demanded.

"I-Inspection," she replied. "I have the *Inspection* skill."

Jason's mind wheeled at this revelation. He hadn't known there was a skill that let players identify a monster's weaknesses. He would have to have a talk with Eliza later – assuming they survived this. For now, he needed to focus on the battle at hand. "Frank," he shouted. The barbarian's head swiveled where he hovered in the air nearby. "It's weak to electricity. Use your gloves!"

Before Frank could reply, another tentacle swept forward and crashed into the barbarian. The creature's limb swiftly curled around his form, incapacitating him even as he strained against the muscular tentacles. However, with his arms trapped, there was little that the barbarian could do to break free.

"Riley, heal Frank," Jason shouted.

He then turned his attention to the remaining cultist zombies still standing on the ship's deck. Three had already perished under the creature's attacks. He swiftly ordered them to channel air mana and soon crackling electricity wound around their hands. As one, they faced Frank and fired, bolts of lightning blasting forward and pushing back at the mist that swirled around the ship.

The energy slammed into the tentacle holding Frank, electrifying both the creature and the barbarian at the same time. Frank let out a roar of pain and Jason watched anxiously as he saw his friend's health dip – only to be replenished a moment later as Riley channeled her health toward him in a river of blood-red energy.

The creature echoed Frank's roar of pain and released him, its tentacle singed and burning. Frank didn't allow the creature to recover, his wings mending quickly under Riley's care. He shot through the air toward the Tentacle Horror, rage in his eyes as he

swung his axes over his head. Lightning coiled up the length of the metal, forking and lancing through the air erratically.

With a final scream of anger, Frank crashed into the creature and his blades sliced into its skin. Black blood drenched his form as he continued to swing with wild abandon, striking the creature again and again and again as its piercing wails filled the air.

"Try to keep him up!" Jason shouted at Riley, noticing her brow furrowed in concentration. He saw that her health was beginning to plummet even with her *Health Drain*. She could only keep this up for a few more seconds.

"Eliza, do you have any healing potions?" he asked. She didn't respond immediately. Trembling, her wide eyes focused on Frank as she watched the battle waging across the deck. He grabbed her shoulder, shaking her roughly. "Snap out of it! Can you heal Riley?"

The mage glanced at him with a stunned expression and then nodded slightly. Eliza quickly hurried over to Riley, lurching to the side as the tentacles wrapped around the ship contracted. Wooden boards crumbled, and the shouts of the sailors filled the air. Eliza managed to make it to Riley, slipping a healing potion from her pack, unstoppering it and holding it to Riley's lips.

Meanwhile, Jason's cultists reentered the fray, bombarding the monster with bolt after bolt of energy. The lightning crackled along the creature's slick skin, causing its limbs to jerk sporadically. Jason ordered a few of the cultists to man the cannons, the posts having been abandoned by the sailors who dove below decks to avoid the tentacles.

A thundering roar erupted along the starboard side of the ship as the cannons fired. The blasts struck the creature at point-blank range and flames crawled over its skin. Eliza had mentioned it was resistant to fire, but the creature's screams of pain seemed to indicate that it was still doing *some* damage.

The creature shuddered under the relentless wave of missiles and Frank's furious strikes. Then it craned its body toward the sky and gave one final wail. The sound caused the air to vibrate violently and visible waves of energy emanated from its maw. The force of the scream sent Frank flying backward, his back slamming into the deck of the ship with a crunch of wood. Jason clutched at his ears in a vain attempt to drown out the noise even as a notification in his peripheral vision indicated that he had been stunned.

The Tentacle Horror began to retreat, its tentacles sliding free from the deck and the ship listing hard to the side. Eliza stumbled and fell toward the railing, almost falling overboard. Riley leaped forward at the last moment and grabbed at the water mage's tunic, physically dragging her back aboard the ship.

And then there was silence.

The seconds ticked by, but the creature didn't resurface. Jason slowly pulled himself to his feet, eyeing the area around himself cautiously. Frank was lying on the ground, blood running from rips in his skin where the tentacle horror's barbed suckers had latched onto him. Riley and Eliza were struggling to regain their feet – their expressions stunned and bewildered.

The ship and its crew hadn't fared much better. Nearly a dozen bodies littered the deck, their blood staining the old wooden planks. Jason suspected many more had been pulled overboard or into the creature's gaping maw. The railing along the side of the ship had been destroyed in several places, and large holes had been carved into the deck. He could only imagine that the damage below decks was worse. They were likely taking on water.

As Jason surveyed the damage, a single thought kept rebounding through his head. *How are we going to make it to the island?* Even if they did make it, how would they get back to Falcon's Hook?

Chapter 13 - Desperate

Alexion stood in the catacombs below the Lady's temple. The area was faintly lit by the torches lining the walls, the flickering light casting long shadows against the dusty brick floor. On Alexion's order, the crypt below the temple had been excavated and expanded tremendously. Now dormitories and training rooms lay hidden underneath the cathedral – creating a new home for his would-be recruits. What little desiccated remains that had been left in the crypt were unceremoniously dumped outside the city. He had little use for the dead.

A crowd of men and women wearing pristine white robes now knelt on the ground before Alexion. None of them bore the ivory wings of the nephilim. That was important. The winged creatures made fantastic soldiers and were too valuable to waste on this experiment.

Caerus and Gracien stood quietly beside Alexion. The fire mage master shifted impatiently, flames curling around the head of his staff and reflecting his poor temper. His irritation secretly pleased Alexion, and he let the man stew for a moment longer before finally stepping forward to address the recruits that filled the room.

"You all have been chosen," his voice echoed through the gloomy crypt. "You have been hand selected by the Lady herself to be her first Confessors. You will be the first of an elite group, dedicated to spreading the Lady's word and ferreting out the blasphemers and heretics that would seek to undermine and harm her righteous cause."

Alexion motioned to a woman in the front row, her eyes shining with a frantic religious fervor as she hung on Alexion's words. "Rise my child." The woman stepped forward until she stood directly in front of Alexion, bowing her head. "Tell me your sins. Confess and repent, and the Lady shall grant you her power."

The woman glanced nervously at the men and women who filled the room before her eyes finally rested on Alexion. "I-I broke into my neighbor's house during the transformation of Grey Keep – I mean, the Crystal Reach," she began quietly. "They had been killed in the fighting." She hesitated, meeting Alexion's gaze. "I took their possessions and sold them to the travelers.

"Please forgive me," she whispered.

Alexion nodded, pleasantly surprised at the disciples that Caerus had chosen. They were a splendid mix of corruption and unblinking devotion to the Lady. "Your confession has been heard and witnessed by the Lady," Alexion intoned. "You have been judged worthy of her blessing and a ready vessel for her power. Do not flinch or shy away as we make the Lady's

mark."

With a nod at Gracien, the pair approached the woman and stood on either side of her. Alexion gently pulled back on the hem of the woman's robe, exposing the bare skin of her shoulders. Simultaneously, Alexion and Gracien each pulled a metal stylus from their packs. They began carving a system of intricate runes into the woman's skin – each man's stylus leaving a glowing line of orange and white as fresh droplets of blood trailed from the symbols. The woman drew in a sharp hissing breath as they etched the runes into her back, but she managed to stand still.

As the two men completed the designs, the runes suddenly flared with power, and an explosion of energy filled the small room. The woman finally lost her resolve, screaming in pain as the energy coursed through her veins. Then she slumped to the floor unmoving. Alexion glanced anxiously at Gracien, wondering if they had somehow improperly drawn the runes. Yet the fire mage master seemed unperturbed, glancing with a bored expression at the woman's prone form.

A moment later, a faint moan escaped the woman's lips. She struggled to regain her feet, wobbling unsteadily for a few seconds. Looking down at her hands uncertainly, flames blossomed along her fingers – requiring no gestures or incantations on her part. The flames ate away at her skin. The woman hissed in pain, and the flames abruptly extinguished. Yet only moments later, her flesh began to knit back together.

Alexion heard a few audible gasps from the men and women waiting their turn to receive the blessing, and they shuffled slightly where they still knelt on the floor, their robes scraping against the stone tiles. He had to admit that the effects of the inscriptions were… interesting.

"Welcome sister," Alexion said, his voice echoing slightly through the underground chamber. "You have been bestowed with the Lady's light, providing natural regeneration and healing. Yet you are a sword first and foremost – a living armament tasked with imposing the Lady's will – and so you have been granted a fitting weapon. A flame of faith to smite the Lady's enemies."

Alexion's eyes turned back to his remaining followers, noticing the look of fervent devotion burning in their eyes. Leaning forward, they eagerly watched the flames that were once again dancing along the new Confessor's fingers. The malignant whisper in the back of Alexion's mind hummed in approval. They would be a fitting force for what he had planned next.

* * *

Jason shook himself from his stupor. He couldn't afford to

stand around idle amid the aftermath of the Tentacle Horror's attack. While Eliza and Riley had escaped the battle relatively unscathed, a glance at his party menu confirmed that Frank's health was beginning to redline as he bled out on the ship's deck. Acting quickly, Jason rushed forward, unstoppering one of the healing potions that Eliza had given him, and placing the bottle to his friend's lips.

A moment later, Frank's face began to regain some of its color and he was able to push himself to a sitting position. "Thanks. That damn thing hit like a truck," he muttered, running a hand through his hair and staring at the black muck that covered his fingers.

"No kidding," Riley interjected. "I was barely able to keep you up with my *Health Transfer*. We're lucky we managed to scare it off." Eliza gave a mute nod, still looking a little shell-shocked by the sudden battle.

Their conversation was interrupted as Captain Razen marched across the deck toward them. "What in the name of the six gods was that thing?" the man shouted, several of the surviving sailors turning to watch the captain.

"I believe that was the island's guardian," Jason replied calmly, giving Frank a hand up.

The captain glared at him accusingly. "Are you telling me that you knew we would encounter that *thing* in the mists? Why didn't you warn anyone? It damn near killed us all!" Jason could see the remaining crew struggling to their feet, stepping cautiously around the bodies of the fallen that riddled the deck and taking stock of their injuries.

"I had no idea what we would face," Jason said, meeting the Captain's gaze. His dark mana flared forcefully, and the chill energy burned through his mind, leaving little room for doubt or hesitation. "I only *suspected* that there was a creature guarding the island and I did alert the crew to the possible danger."

"Tell that to the men who just died! Although, I bet you'll get the chance soon," the captain raged, gesturing at the damage to the ship. "We'll all be sitting at the bottom of the ocean within the next few minutes. You signed our death sentence." With this last statement, his hand started to drift toward the sword at his waist.

Before his hand touched the hilt, Riley appeared behind the captain and her blade pressed against his neck. "I suggest you keep this conversation civil," she said in a grim tone. "Otherwise, you won't be around long enough to see this ship sink." The remaining sailors on the deck froze, their hands already beginning to reach for their weapons as they watched the exchange.

"Thank you, Riley," Jason said with a curt nod.

At a mental command from Jason, the remaining cultists turned

to face the still-breathing sailors, elemental energy crackling along their hands. The rugged men and women eyed the zombies warily, but they didn't seem intimidated. The fact that the Marietta was sinking might have had something to do with that. The threat of death held little weight in their current situation.

"Let me be clear, Captain," Jason began, turning back to the man. "We are going to that island. With or without your crew."

Jason's gaze shifted to the bodies of the dead sailors that littered the deck. It looked like they had lost nearly half of the crew already. Outside of the Twilight Throne's area of influence, he couldn't create new undead NPCs using *Undead Devotion*, but he could do the next best thing. At this stage, there was no sense hiding his true nature. There was little risk that they would be confronted by players with that *thing* guarding the island.

Jason pushed back his hood, revealing his black irises. Captain Razen flinched back as he caught sight of Jason's appearance and Riley's blade pressed more forcefully against his neck. Ignoring the captain's reaction, Jason's hands began to wind through an intricate series of gestures, dark energy twining between his fingers before racing toward the bodies of the fallen sailors. Their skin immediately began to turn a sickly pale white as their bodies jerked reflexively under the effects of the spell.

Captain Razen and the surviving crew members looked on in horror as the dead sailors rose slowly to their feet, their vacant white eyes focusing on Jason. "W-what are you?" Captain Razen stuttered, the color draining from his face.

"I suppose that there's no sense hiding it now," Jason replied coolly. "My name is Jason, and I'm the Regent of the Twilight Throne."

"You're *that* Jason?" Eliza yelped, staring at him with wide eyes.

Frank chuckled at her reaction, and the water mage blushed slightly. "He's not a ghost," the barbarian remarked in a bemused voice.

Captain Razen recovered some of his fire during this exchange, spitting on the deck and glaring at Jason. "Well, I don't care if you're the Dark One himself. I'm not taking orders on my own ship – especially if it puts what is left of my crew at risk." His hand was once again edging slowly toward his weapon.

Jason eyed the man appraisingly. He could see that he was beginning to dig in his heels. The remaining crew also looked tense, eyeing the cultist zombies warily and ready to spring. This wouldn't do at all. He needed their cooperation if they were going to make it to the island and return to Falcon's Hook. Jason and his team certainly couldn't operate the Marietta on their own.

Then he hesitated. Or could they?

With a flick of his wrist, Jason pulled up his Summon Information window and selected one of the newly-summoned sailors. A grim smile curled his lips as he reviewed the skill list for his new minions. He felt a momentary pang of guilt as he contemplated what he planned to do next, yet the numbing chill of his mana quickly swept away his reservations. He was this game's villain after all. He ought to start acting like it.

"What are you smiling about, you bastard?" Captain Razen demanded.

"I just realized that your services are no longer required," Jason replied calmly. "But I'm afraid I'm going to need your body – as well as the bodies of the rest of the crew. My apologies for the inconvenience."

With a nod to Riley, she drew her blade across the Captain's neck, blood jetting from the wound and staining the deck a brilliant crimson. The man let out a strangled gurgle as he sank to his knees, his hands clutching at his throat in a vain attempt to stem the red tide. Meanwhile, Jason's zombies launched into action, bolts of elemental energy neatly severing the mortal coil of each surviving crew member before they could react – their screams filling the air once more.

A moment later, silence descended upon the deck of the ship. "You just… just killed them all," Eliza murmured, staring in shock at the fresh corpses that now littered the deck.

"I had little choice," Jason replied, glancing at her over his shoulder. "We don't have time to stand here bickering with the ship sinking and they were about to mutiny."

"Won't it be impossible to make to the island now that they're dead?" Riley asked, wiping her blade on the former captain's tunic before sheathing it. "It's not like we can operate the ship…"

"My new zombies retained all of the sailors' skills. I should be able to raise their corpses and have them sail us to the island. Hopefully…" Jason added.

"Well, that's certainly confidence inspiring," Frank remarked in a dry tone. "You know, now that you've already killed them all."

Jason ignored his friend's teasing. They indeed had little time to stand there debating his decision. He needed to get below decks and assess the damage. With that chilling thought, his hands once again began moving through the gestures of *Specialized Zombie*. Soon, Captain Razen and the remaining crew were once again standing upon the ship's deck – although this time they seemed much more amenable to Jason's instructions.

The ship suddenly shuddered, listing slightly to the side. Frank grabbed at the railing to steady himself. "This is all great," he said, gesturing at the new undead, "but I think we're still sinking."

Jason grimaced. "I'll go check on the damage to the hull. You all can

focus on cleaning up the deck and get the crew started repairing the sails." He motioned to the heap of cloth that had collapsed against the deck – the monster's flailing tentacles having severed several ropes during the battle.

He didn't wait for his friends' responses, mentally commanding several of his cultist zombies to take point. Energy crackled around their hands as they moved into the ship's interior. There were likely still sailors hiding below decks and Jason suspected that they wouldn't be open to negotiating now that he had killed off the remainder of the crew.

As Jason descended into the ship, his boots immediately sank into a foot of water. He was standing in a cramped hallway, doors leading off to the various crew quarters. As he systematically searched the rooms, he could see that the Tentacle Horror had done a number on the Marietta. The creature must have latched onto the ship underwater because holes had been torn into the wooden hull. Water streamed in through the cracks as the ship lurched from side to side.

His group made their way forward slowly, the cultist zombies killing off the sailors that they discovered hiding below decks. The men and women fought bravely given the circumstances, but they were no match for a hail of elemental projectiles. Jason promptly raised the crew members and then set them to work repairing the damage to the hull. Perhaps he could at least slow the water streaming into the ship.

After clearing the first level, Jason and his cultists journeyed further into the Marietta. Captain Razen had been clear that the cargo hold on the bottom level was strictly off limits and so Jason had not had an opportunity to explore this area yet. As he reached the hold, Jason's eyes widened in shock. The water was much deeper on this level, rising nearly to his waist. Crates and barrels had already begun to float atop the water, creating debris that made it difficult to navigate the hold.

Jason froze as he heard screams and cries of pain over the roar of the waves crashing against the ship and water rushing in through the tears in the hull. His cultist zombies responded immediately, two minions taking up defensive positions around Jason as the others investigated the cargo hold.

A moment later, one of his zombies returned, speaking in a harsh voice, "Master, we have found more survivors on the other end of the hold. They are restrained and pose little risk."

"Take me to them," Jason commanded.

After trudging through several feet of water, his group was soon standing in front of an iron gridwork that had been installed directly into the ship's hull. Given his recent experience, Jason knew a prison

cell when he saw one. Inside, desperate-looking men and women were chained to wooden benches, their eyes sunken and their bodies emaciated. Iron collars had been attached to their necks, red glowing crystals embedded into the metal.

These weren't crew members.

Jason recalled Captain Razen mentioning that they were transporting "animals." Clearly, he had really meant slaves. He could see that the captain had tried to hide the cell, piling up crates and barrels in front of the holding area – the wooden containers having floated away now that the cargo hold was taking on water.

As the slaves caught sight of Jason's dark-robed form, they called out to him, their voices frantic. In their seated positions, the water had already risen to their chests, and they didn't have much time left.

A woman near the edge of the cell reached a feeble hand toward Jason, her eyes wide and scared. "Help me, please!" she croaked, her lips cracked and bleeding. "Please don't leave us."

Jason stood frozen in indecision as he watched the men and women straining against their manacles and the wild terror in their eyes. They didn't look like they were in any condition to help repair the ship. Even if he freed them, his group wasn't exactly in a position to be helping a group of slaves – they would all likely be underwater within the next hour.

Suddenly, the world around Jason stuttered slightly. He glanced at the slaves in confusion, noting the way they sat rigidly on the benches, their mouths open and frozen mid-shout. As Jason looked around the hold, he could see that the water rushing into the ship also hung suspended in the air, the torrent of water stopped by some unknown force.

"It has been a long time, boy," a deep voice spoke from behind Jason. He turned to find the familiar, cloaked form of the Old Man standing behind him, his feet resting lightly upon the top of the water. The god's wrinkled hand gripped the rod of his scythe, and he seemed unperturbed by the water lining the bottom of the cargo hold.

"I suppose it has," Jason replied noncommittally. "We should really stop meeting like this."

The Old Man barked out a harsh chuckle. "It is good that you are able to jest given your current predicament."

"About that. I have a few pressing matters to attend to," Jason said, gesturing at the slaves and the holes carved into the hull of the ship. "Is there something you need? If not, maybe we can wrap this up and let me get back to it."

"Still so impatient," the Old Man grumbled. "In fact, I come to offer some *assistance*."

Jason raised an eyebrow. The dark god's help never came without

strings. “Really? What exactly are you proposing?”
The man’s lips curled into a grim grin beneath his cowled hood, the rest of his face hidden in shadow. “With the slaughter of the crew, you created enough dark energy to allow me to appear to you. Depending on how you choose to proceed from here, I may be able to offer you and your ‘friends’ salvation in your time of need.”
“Get on with it,” Jason replied, irritated by the Old Man’s ambiguous explanations. “What do I need to do?”
“Simple. Kill the slaves,” the god replied curtly. “Their deaths should give me sufficient power to help address your current troubles.”
Jason hesitated, his dark mana faltering as he considered what the Old Man was asking. His gaze shifted back to the desperate men and women chained up inside the cell. The woman’s hand still hung frozen in the air, her fingers clawing at the air as her mouth hung open – likely begging and pleading for help. If he killed them here, their deaths would be permanent. He couldn’t raise them as NPCs this far from the Twilight Throne.

The Old Man wanted him to slaughter a group of defenseless slaves.
“You hesitate,” the Old Man commented, watching him closely. “Why? Your quest and the lives of you and your groupmates depend upon this sacrifice.”
Jason didn’t answer at first – in part because he wasn’t sure why he was hesitating. His thoughts turned back to the encounter with the players on the way to Falcon’s Hook, the massacre of the guards outside of town, and the confrontation with Captain Razen. He had taken the lives of those people without hesitation – striking first and without provocation. He was beginning to change, and he wasn’t certain he was comfortable with the result.

“You’re asking me to kill innocent people,” Jason murmured.

“You have killed before,” The Old Man replied. “And many of those people were *innocent* – at least, depending on your perspective.”

“But not like this. These people haven’t done anything to me. They’re defenseless.”

“And the people of Peccavi? Were they not defenseless?”

Jason shook his head. “That was different. They were sick and starving. I offered them a choice, and they decided to sacrifice themselves.”

“And yet your motives were still selfish,” The Old Man replied, a faint trace of amusement coloring his voice. “You used those people and their desperation for your own ends. I fail to see the difference here.”

Jason was taken aback by the dark god’s response. He was having trouble refuting his logic, but he still hesitated. “It just feels

wrong," he finally replied, even though his response felt hollow.

The Old Man scoffed. "Right and wrong are concepts for weak minds and weaker men. You are a leader now, boy. Your decisions must be judged by their consequences, with the welfare of your people in mind. Are you ready to fail here for the sake of your conscience? Are you ready to let down all of the people that now depend on you?"

Jason winced as he listened to the god, the image of Angie's face flashing through his mind. The Old Man was right. He did have people that relied on him, and he couldn't afford to die here. How would they find another ship? How long would it take to return to the mists? Assuming, of course, they were somehow able to survive the tentacle horror's attack a second time. He could feel the certainty of the Old Man's words pressing in on him, his logic cold and inexorable.

"Fine," Jason finally said, raising his eyes to meet the god's. Yet he discovered that the Old Man had vanished, and he now stood alone within the cargo hold with his undead. Time began to gradually unfreeze, the water slowly cascading from the hull and the desperate pleas of the slaves once more echoing through the hold.

"You will have your sacrifice," Jason murmured.

With a mental command, one of his cultist zombies stepped forward. Ice coated the zombie's hand, and he pressed it against the padlock swinging from the holding cell. The chill energy swept over the metal until a thick coating of frost covered its surface. Jason then stepped forward and slammed the butt of his dagger against the lock, causing it to shatter into small fragments. His zombies wrenched the door open – the action made difficult by the rising water.

Unable to listen to the pleading and screams of the slaves, Jason's hands began moving through *Curse of Silence*. A moment later, sharp needles of malignant energy pierced the bodies of the slaves and their pleas abruptly stopped.

Jason approached the woman who had begged for her life. She looked surprised when no sound escaped her lips, and she struggled more urgently against her bindings. For a brief moment, Jason considered walking away and letting his zombies kill the slaves. That would be the easy thing to do. Yet he forced himself to keep approaching the woman. If he was going to do this, then he should own his decision.

He placed the blade of his dagger against the woman's throat. She stared at him with wide eyes, her mouth moving but no sound escaping her lips. "I'm not doing this because I want to," Jason said softly. "I do this because I have to."

"I'm sorry," he whispered as the blade cut through the woman's throat. Blood gushed from the wound and drenched Jason's hand. His stomach churned as he watched the scene, the images of the dead

teenagers lying on the floor of his room once more appearing in his mind's eye. He forcefully summoned his dark mana and willed himself to continue, walking between each of the slaves. He whispered apology after apology and then took each of their lives.

A few moments later, the deed was done. Jason stood staring at the bodies of the fallen men and women, the water swirling around the cage now stained crimson. Almost mechanically, he raised their corpses one by one as his cultist zombies removed their manacles. There was no sense letting their corpses go to waste.

His task complete, Jason made the journey topside. He felt numb as he stepped back onto the ship's deck. He had expected a whirlwind of chaotic thoughts or desperate guilt. He had expected *something*. Instead, he just felt hollow.

As Jason approached his teammates, the ship suddenly lurched once more, tilting to the side. However, this time, the sudden movement was different.

Glancing up sharply, Jason could see the ship around him beginning to change. The cracked and aged wood transformed into a smooth dark ebony, and the tears in the ship's hull began to repair themselves. At the same time, the once tattered and toppled sail began to piece itself back together as ropes whipped through the air.

Moments later, the cloth sails had taken on a translucent, almost ethereal appearance and shimmered as they flapped in the stiff breeze that blew through the mists. The deck now shone dully, light glinting off its blackened surface as billowing dark clouds of moisture began to form atop of the sails, causing the already murky gloom created by the mists to darken even further.

Then a notification crashed into Jason's field of view.

System Notice

The slaughter of the Marietta's crew and the slaves you discovered below decks have cast a pall of darkness over the vessel, cursing it and transforming it into a ghost ship. As long as undead man the Marietta, they will no longer suffer from decay.

Jason's group watched him in shock as he strode across the deck, their expressions warring between confusion and surprise as they surveyed the changes to the ship and the fresh blood staining Jason's clothes.

"What is this?" Riley murmured as Jason neared them.

“A second chance,” Jason replied gravely.

Chapter 14 - Exploratory

Alexion surveyed his Confessors' handiwork. Large wooden beams had been buried in uneven intervals throughout the field and straw had been carefully piled at the base of each pillar. The men and women tied to each column moaned and pleaded with the white-robed Confessors, the sound muffled by their gags. Alexion noted with approval that not one of his new recruits spared a second glance at the traitors.

A crowd had gathered in the field outside of the Crystal Reach, half-hewn stalks of hay waving gently in the faint breeze and the city's crystalline walls looming in the distance. A mixture of players and NPCs watched nervously – a low murmur rippling through the crowd. Alexion noted that many looked on with anger, likely a product of Caerus' work within the city. The noble had proven himself invaluable at spreading rumors and gossip – including the execution of these traitors who had been harboring fugitives from the old regime.

With a wave of Alexion's hand, a Confessor approached each pillar, flames weaving and dancing between their fingers. After only a few days, his Confessors were able to summon the fires without any sign of pain, despite the way the flames charred their own flesh. It only took a moment for them to set fire to the stacks of hay, and soon a series of infernos raged through the field. The roar of the flames mingled with the muted screams of the men and women who had chosen to betray their city.

"A persuasive show of power," Caerus commented from beside Alexion, his gaze resting on the columns. He gestured to the crowd hovering around the field. "I believe this will strike a heavy blow against the remaining rebels."

"Of course, it will," Alexion snapped, the nephilim guards standing around them shuffling uneasily at his sharp tone. Leave it to Caerus to state the obvious.

The pair lapsed into silence as one-by-one the traitors stopped moving, falling limp against the wooden pillars. Alexion was about to signal his winged-soldiers and Confessors to return to the city when a shout went up from the tree line adjacent to the field. Alexion whirled, catching sight of nearly fifty men and women racing from the woods, their weapons held high.

"The rebels are attacking!" Caerus shouted, alerting the Confessors to the new threat. He motioned to the nephilim, and the winged guards immediately encircled Alexion, their spear points leveled at the impending threat.

"Should we call for reinforcements?" Caerus asked Alexion, his

sword already held at the ready. His eyes darted to their audience – many of which had already started stumbling back to the safety of the city's walls.

Alexion snorted derisively as he noted the makeshift weapons held by the rebels and their motley assortment of armor. "No. Let us see how our Confessors fare in a real fight," he ordered the noble.

The white-robed men and women turned to face the oncoming threat, and, at a command from Alexion, they immediately began sprinting toward the rebels. There was no hesitation or fear in their eyes – only a mad fury. The voice in the back of Alexion's mind purred in delight as he noted the feverish devotion that seemed to fill his Confessors' bodies and the way the stinging flames immediately curled around their bare fists.

The two forces crashed into one another. A Confessor punched forward, flames arcing through the air and immediately engulfing a rebel. The man screamed in agony, dropping to the ground and trying desperately to put out the flames. Despite his efforts, the fire continued to burn brightly.

Another rebel stabbed at a white-robed woman, but, instead of dodging the blow, she leaned into it. The metal impaled her torso and blood bubbled from the wound. A grim smile curled her lips even as she coughed harshly, and blood trickled down her chin. She lunged forward and grabbed the rebel around the throat, channeling flames along her arms. The fire raced toward his horror-stricken face, before engulfing him completely. As the man finally collapsed, his body burnt and broken, the Confessor yanked the sword from her torso, and the wound in her chest immediately began to repair itself.

"Fascinating," Alexion murmured. The insidious voice was now shouting wildly in his mind – demanding death, destruction, and mayhem. It urged him to enter the fray, and it took most of his considerable willpower to resist.

The runes that Gracien had taught him were permanent and could only be used on individuals with a high affinity for the relevant element used to inscribe the runes. The recruits that Caerus had gathered were a perfect choice, their passion and their unwavering faith in the Lady granting them an unnaturally high affinity for both fire and light.

The runes fed off a person's mana, allowing them to channel specific spells without the use of Veridian or the regular gestures. The downside of the ritual was that the runes locked the use of any other spells. Alexion knew that if his Confessors ran out of mana, they would no longer be able to channel their abilities – making them effectively useless. Yet, as he watched the massacre in the field, he felt comfortable with these tradeoffs.

A few minutes later, his Confessors stood over the burnt and bloodied bodies of the rebels. Their white robes were torn and ripped, but they stood proudly – not a single man or woman having fallen in the

assault. The nearby crowd had stopped their flight, turning to stare at the battle with awestruck expressions.

"You have fought for the glory of the Lady!" Alexion shouted, stepping forward toward his Confessors and the nephilim parting to let him pass. "Now finish the job. Light the heathens ablaze. Create a flame that our Lady will witness from the heavens!"

The Confessors promptly spread out through the field. A moment later, they had formed a rough circle around the pile of rebel corpses. As one, they raised their arms, flames already coiling up their arms. Then they began channeling their mana. A torrent of fire raced from each man and woman, meeting in the center of the circle and colliding with explosive force. The flames expanded in a concentric circle, the heat so intense that Alexion could feel it from where he stood several dozen yards away.

Soon a veritable tower of flames lanced into the sky, incinerating the bodies of the fallen and the column visible to all of the residents of The Crystal Reach. As he watched the scene unfolding before him, a malicious smile lingered on Alexion's lips. Beside him, Caerus' mouth was parted in surprise, his hand hovering over the hilt of his sword.

"Take note, Caerus," Alexion said to the noble. "You are witnessing the first true consecration. The first of many."

* * *

Jason stood on the prow of the Marietta, his hood pushed back and his eyes resting on the dense, soupy fog that still lingered around the ship. They had traveled for several hours after he had slain Captain Razen and his crew. Their journey was made more difficult by their impaired vision. Jason could only hope that they would randomly stumble upon Anguine Isle in this fog.

The monster they had encountered hadn't returned. The beast almost certainly explained the disappearance of the other ships. Jason could only assume that they had managed to injure or scare it off. He just couldn't be certain how long their brief respite would last before the Tentacle Horror returned to finish the job it had started.

Jason's thoughts were troubled, and he clung to the numbing chill of his dark mana like a lifeline. He kept returning to his conversation with the Old Man, disturbed by the implications of the dark god's arguments. The more he considered the events of the last few weeks and the actions he had taken, the more difficult it became to deny the dark god's logic. But that wasn't what bothered him the most. He had always considered himself to be a good person. But was he? Was he really? The line between his real life and the game kept

getting more and more blurry.

"Penny for your thoughts," Riley said, approaching from behind Jason.

"Dark and brooding," he replied with a forced smile. "Seriously, though, I hope we find this island soon. It feels like we are fumbling around blindly in this fog."

"I'm sure it will happen eventually," she said, watching him closely. "Frank is on the lower decks. The transformation took care of the larger holes in the hull, but we are still taking on some water."

Apparently, there is a limit to the Old Man's power, Jason thought darkly.

"And Eliza?" he asked, recalling the water mage's reaction when he had revealed his identity. She had been avoiding him for the last few hours, and he had caught her staring on more than one occasion. He expected that his reputation – and possibly the slaughter of the crew – had unnerved the timid girl.

"She's with Frank. She's still strange as ever, but at least she didn't try to jump overboard after we started killing everyone," Riley replied, shaking her head.

She hesitated for a moment before continuing in a more tentative voice, "Speaking of which, are you okay? I know you must be getting that question a lot, but it seems like you have been more… ruthless lately. First, we offed those players on the road to Falcon's Hook, and now we just slaughtered these sailors."

Jason rubbed at his eyes, a faint headache pounding behind his temples. She had left out the death of the guards in Falcon's Hook and the slaves in the cargo hold, although he wasn't about to bring up those incidents. "Honestly? Not really. I'm basically at the mercy of Cerillion Entertainment right now while the police are investigating the breakin. I have nowhere else to go. On top of that, I've put Angie in the same situation."

"You didn't exactly force those two kids to break in or attack you," Riley interjected, a frown creasing her forehead. "This isn't your fault."

"Maybe not," Jason replied noncommittally. He suspected she might not be so quick to take that position if she knew about Alfred. "But either way, this isn't a game for me anymore," he continued in a strangled voice, squeezing his eyes shut and his dark mana faltering. "I have no choice but to keep moving forward as fast as possible. That means I can't let anything or *anyone* get in our way."

That was only the half of it. He was now actively concealing Alfred's existence, and he hadn't mentioned his disconcerting conversation with Robert about the new headsets. The weight of those secrets was almost tangible, pressing down on his shoulders. What was

worse was that he felt like he was carrying this weight alone. For a brief moment, he considered just telling Riley everything, but he stopped himself. Alfred was watching him from where he lounged precariously on the ship's railing, his feline eyes unblinking as they stared at him.

Without warning, Riley stepped closer and put her arms around Jason, hugging him gently. He froze, not expecting the gesture. "I'm sorry this is happening to you. If it helps, you're not alone. You have Frank and me."

The tension began to drain from Jason's shoulders, and he squeezed his eyes shut – a weak attempt to stop the involuntary tears budding in the corners of his eyes. "Thank you," he said softly. "I mean it."

Riley withdrew. "Hey, that's what friends are for," she replied. Then a grin swept across her face. "Plus, you probably owe me some tears at this point. I have to say that you aren't the cutest crier either."

This earned her a chuckle from Jason, as he wiped at the stray tears on his cheeks. "Better keep that to yourself. The evil ruler of an undead empire shouldn't be caught bawling on the deck of his ghostly death ship. Jerry would be offended at the idea – or, hell, he might include it in his ballad. It's hard to say."

"Master," one of Jason's minions croaked, approaching the pair and interrupting their conversation. "Our scout reports that the mists have begun to clear," he continued, gesturing at a zombie perched in the Marietta's crow's nest.

Jason could indeed see that the vapor was slowly thinning. "Everyone to their stations," he called out, grabbing his minions' attention. Who knew what they would find when they emerged from the fog, but he wasn't going to be caught unprepared. His cultists immediately took up defensive positions on the deck, elemental energy crackling along their hands. Meanwhile, Riley pulled her bow from her back and readied an arrow.

The fog slowly began to thin, and then, all at once, they emerged from the mist. The sunlight was blinding after hours spent in the dense fog, and Jason squinted involuntarily. As his vision cleared, he could see that the bright light did not reach the ship's deck. Instead, tendrils of black energy curled away from the hull, forming a semi-transparent shell around the Marietta that blocked the harsh sunlight.

"Land ho," his scout zombie cried in a hoarse voice, followed closely by a hacking cough.

They had exited the wall of mist within a few hundred yards of an island, a white sandy beach visible ahead of them. Jason glanced to either side of the ship, noting that a veritable wall of fog ringed the

foreign landmass in a perfect circle – which indicated magic at work. He could only imagine the amount of mana it would take to sustain a spell like this.

The island was eerily similar to the image he had seen in his vision. Its coast expanded outward for several miles in each direction. The interior was rocky and rose steeply in elevation from the beach. On the far northern end of the island stood a single massive pillar of stone that stretched into the sky. Even at this distance, Jason could see that it resembled a snake, its serpentine head craning toward the clouds.

"It looks like we found it," Riley said, loosening her grip on her bow.

"Now what are we going to do with it?" Frank asked, approaching the pair with Eliza in tow. The water mage kept her gaze on the deck, avoiding eye contact with Jason.

"Good question," Jason replied. "How are the repairs coming along?"

Frank winced. "That creature really did a number on the ship. I'm not sure if we're going to be able to make it back in this state. It'll probably take at least a few hours to patch up the larger tears."

The barbarian's gaze shifted to the island and the dense foliage that filled the interior. "We've been disassembling crates and barrels for scrap lumber, but a few trees might be helpful so that we can make some roughshod boards. Some of your sailors have novice-level woodworking skills."

Jason chewed at his lip for a second in thought before making a decision. He turned to the former Captain Razen, his soulless white eyes fixed on Jason and awaiting orders. The man was much more amenable to direction now. "Beach the ship. Then get the crew to cut down a few trees and focus on repairs." The zombie nodded mutely in response before shuffling off to direct Jason's other minions.

"That's going to make it difficult to get out of here in a hurry. You know, when we inevitably piss off the island's inhabitants," Riley pointed out, chuckling softly. Eliza nodded slowly in agreement, her eyes lingering briefly on Jason's dark form.

"Fair enough," Jason replied with a grin. "But it's the best option we have at the moment. It doesn't help us to be able to retreat quickly if we just sink immediately afterward. Let's get ready. We'll be on land soon."

With that, his group set to work. A few minutes later, the Marietta ground to a halt on the beach, the ship lurching violently as it plowed into the sandy embankment. Jason's minions promptly dropped the gangplank, several of the undead foregoing the ramp and simply jumping overboard with a splash. They immediately began to

dig at the sand around the base of the ship, shoring up the hull and making certain that it would stay put.

As Jason made his way down to the beach, a quest update appeared in his field of view.

Quest Update: Strength of Many

You have bested the mists and driven away the creature that protects Anguine Isle – for now, at least. You now need to find the relics that both the Dark One and Lord Baen have described. Perhaps you will also discover the fate of Lord Baen's son in the process. So, all in all, this sounds super easy. Yep, this definitely won't spiral into a huge mess…

Difficulty: A
Success: Gather the following three ingredients:

1. Heart of a dungeon boss.
2. The Dark One's Grimoire.
3. Two willing sacrifices.

Secondary Success: Recover the relic that is causing the mists surrounding Anguine Isle and return it to Lord Baen.
Failure: Unknown
Reward: Advancement in the Path of the Dark

With a sigh and a flick of his wrist, Jason swiped away the notification and turned his attention to their surroundings. The sandy ground swiftly gave way to dense tropical vegetation further inland. Thin trunks stretched toward the sky while thick ferns dotted the ground. What looked like a small game trail led further into the forest, but there were no other visible signs that the island was inhabited.

"So, what's the game plan?" Frank asked.

"Riley and I should probably scout the island," Jason replied, rubbing at his chin. "Perhaps you can stay here to defend the ship and watch the crew while they make the repairs? I'll order them to follow your directions."

"Works for me," Frank said with a shrug, and Riley nodded in agreement.

"Great. We should be back in a few hours," Jason replied, glancing up at the sun. They still had some time before nightfall. "Message me if something terrible happens."

"I'd like to come with you and Riley," Eliza interjected quietly,

fumbling with her pack. “There might be useful ingredients in the forest.”

Jason glanced at the girl in surprise, chewing at his cheek in thought. There was something off about her behavior, but she hadn’t given him any real reason to distrust her. “Alright, that sounds fine. Just make certain you stay near me. Without *Sneak*, you will be vulnerable,” Jason finally said. Then he clapped his hands together. “Alright, let’s get started!”

As Frank started barking orders at the undead, the rest of the group immediately headed toward the small game trail and made their way further inland. Riley took the lead, scouting ahead in *Sneak* while Jason kept a watchful eye on his own map. Not for the first time, he was thankful that his *Tactician* skill allowed him to borrow and log his teammates’ map data.

The group quickly discovered that their progress through the forest was delayed by the dense vegetation that often obscured the trail. Jason was forced to use his dagger to hack at the branches and foliage that overhung the path while Eliza stumbled along behind him. He stayed on high alert, examining the area around them carefully as they moved forward. The forest was alive with birds rustling through the branches of the trees above them and the hum of insects, but he hadn’t noticed any signs of larger predators.

After nearly an hour spent walking in silence, Eliza finally spoke up from behind Jason. “So, you’re the Regent of the Twilight Throne?” she asked tentatively.

“The one and only,” he replied, his eyes on the trail ahead of them. “I don’t like to advertise – you know, what with the real-world bounty on my head.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “You just seem…”

“What?” Jason asked as she trailed off, looking back at her over his shoulder.

“Different from what I was expecting, I guess,” she finally answered, blushing slightly under his scrutiny.

“You mean like a psychopathic murderer?” he asked bluntly.

“Well, not exactly,” Eliza replied cautiously. “I see why you killed the sailors. Actually, I was going to say that you seem like a normal person.”

Jason was forced to do a double take, not quite expecting that response. He also didn’t rush to mention he had killed a bunch of unarmed slaves. He had kept that part quiet from his teammates although he had noticed a few confused glances at Jason’s new zombies. “A lot of the video footage posted online is either misleading or done to scare people away from my city. I don’t particularly want an army of players marching on the Twilight Throne.”

Eliza nodded. “I guess I understand that.”

“And what about you?” he asked, trying to move the topic away from himself. “Between that poisonous mist spell you used back in Falcon’s Hook and your *Inspection* ability, your character is rather unusual. In a good way,” he clarified quickly as he saw her expression fall.

“Those skills aren’t anything special. I received the *Inspection* ability during character creation,” Eliza said. “I think it’s a form of improved *Perception* – at least from what I’ve read online, but it only triggers if I activate it.”

“It’s incredibly useful,” Jason replied. “You were able to identify the Tentacle Horror’s resistances. What else can you tell from inspecting something?”

Eliza stopped and picked a bright-red flower growing alongside the trail, her brow furrowing as she examined its petals. “I can often determine a player’s health, primary skillset, resistances, *etc*. The information is usually incomplete, but at least it’s something.

“Items are different,” she continued, holding up the flower. Her voice sounded excited for the first time since Jason had met her, and her eyes lit up as she spoke. “Like this flower. I can tell you that it’s poisonous if the oil in the petals is distilled. I can also see several possible combinations with other ingredients that might provide an assortment of protective buffs.”

Jason’s eyes widened. That type of ability would be incredibly valuable with her alchemy profession. It just made him realize yet again how little he really understood about this game. “What made you decide to go into alchemy and herbalism?”

Eliza hesitated, glancing at him awkwardly. “My parents are pushing me to go to medical school. I’m pretty close to graduating high school, and they have me in a bunch of prep courses. I-I don’t really enjoy it – at least most of it. I’ve always loved gardening though, and the biology and chemistry classes translate well to *Alchemy* and *Herbalism* in-game.”

“I guess it just sort of fits,” she added in a quiet voice.

“It sounds like it,” Jason replied. He was just about to ask her another question when he received a frantic group message from Riley, his eyes darting along the lines of text.

“What…?” Eliza began, nearly running into Jason as he came to a sudden stop. He lifted a finger to his lips, indicating that she should stay quiet. Meanwhile, he scanned the dense forest around them but was unable to detect anything out of the ordinary. A moment later, Riley dropped from *Sneak* nearby, her chest heaving.

“What is it?” Jason asked.

“There’s a small clearing ahead,” Riley whispered, bringing up

her map and projecting it into the air in front of them. “There are… well, some sort of creatures camped there.”

“Creatures?” Eliza asked, fear tingeing her voice. “Like the thing we encountered on the ship?”

“No. These look like some sort of humanoid lizard,” Riley replied. “They are clearly intelligent. I saw tools and weapons.”

Jason immediately summoned his dark mana, the chill energy flooding his veins and pooling behind his eyes. With the clarity the malignant energy afforded him, he considered how to proceed. If the island was inhabited by some sort of intelligent lizard creature, he needed to determine their number, whether they were hostile, and, if so, what sort of danger they posed. Right now, they had too little information.

“I’d like to get a good look at this camp,” Jason said, turning to Riley. “Do you think I can get close enough to see it myself without being detected?”

Riley chewed on her lip for a second before replying, “Possibly. But Eliza will need to stay here since we’ll need to move forward in *Sneak*.”

“I’ll be fine by myself,” Eliza assured them as they glanced at her. Despite this declaration, Jason noticed that she was fiddling nervously with the hem of her pack again. Unfortunately, he had little choice but to leave her by herself if he was going to get a glimpse of the lizard creatures.

“Fine. You should stay out of sight and off the trail,” Jason suggested, motioning to the dense foliage that surrounded them. “We’ll only be fifteen minutes or so.”

At Eliza’s nod, Jason and Riley simultaneously activated *Sneak* and headed further down the trail, picking their way forward carefully and quietly. A few minutes later, they came to a halt, and Riley took up a position behind a nearby boulder, gesturing for Jason to join her.

Their new vantage point afforded them a view of a small clearing. It appeared that the trees had been removed from this glade some time ago and a series of aged stumps now littered the area. What captured Jason’s attention, however, were the creatures that lounged about the clearing. Riley hadn’t done them justice with her brief description. These were full-fledged lizardmen, standing nearly seven feet tall and each one covered in thick, patchy blue skin.

Jason inspected the group carefully, discovering that the creatures were each above level 160. His gaze lingered on the crude – almost primitive – spears and axes they carried. The weapons were a patchwork of stone and wood, bound together with vines that were likely native to the island. Although, Jason supposed they hardly needed the weapons since each lizardman’s fingers ended in vicious

curved claws. As he watched, one of the creatures picked up a tree limb nearly five feet long, swiftly breaking it into smaller segments with its bare hands before tossing the lumber on a campfire in the middle of the clearing.

Damn, they must be strong.

The lizardmen appeared to be making camp for the evening, pitching patchwork tents in the clearing and hissing at each other in a way that indicated that they had developed their own language. Riley nudged Jason, gesturing off to one side of the clearing and his eyes widened in surprise. A pen composed of wooden stakes had been erected along the tree line, and enormous snakes were curled and coiled together within the enclosure. By Jason's estimate, each one was nearly two dozen feet long. More disconcerting was the stack of leather saddles lying nearby.

Are they mounts? Jason wondered.

He had seen enough. This didn't appear to be a settlement. The fresh carcasses strung up along one side of the camp indicated that this was some sort of hunting party, which meant that there were likely many more of the creatures further inland. Jason put a hand on Riley's shoulder and motioned back down the path. The two quickly retreated further back into the woods.

A few minutes later, they reached the spot where they had left the water mage and dropped out of *Sneak*. "Eliza?" Jason whispered.

He started getting worried when they didn't receive any response for several long moments. Then Eliza abruptly tumbled out of a bush nearby, landing heavily on the dirt trail – stray twigs and leaves caught in her hair. The mage grumbled to herself, looking flustered. Jason could have sworn she mentioned something about a sheep. He would just have to add that to the list of the mage's oddball behaviors.

"Sorry," Eliza said as she caught them staring at her in confusion. "What did you find?"

"My guess is that it's a hunting party," Jason said in a hushed voice, gesturing for her to be quiet. They couldn't be certain whether the lizardmen had posted scouts or patrols around their camp. "What do you think, Riley?"

"I agree. Which means that there must be more of the creatures – probably a lot more."

"So, what do we do now?" Eliza asked, her eyes wide and her finger pushing at her glasses.

"Our best bet is to regroup with Frank," Jason suggested. "I was hoping to find the temple before we made our way back, but we should warn them of this potential threat and possibly grab a few of my minions before we go any further."

“That’s a safe strategy,” Riley agreed.

With a decision in place, the group started back toward the beach. They kept silent as they traveled, speaking only in hushed voices for fear of drawing the attention of any other lizardmen that might be wandering the forest.

Jason froze as they caught sight of the beach, taking cover behind a tree and gesturing for the other two women to do the same. Something was off. Frank and the undead were nowhere to be seen, and the only sound was the roar of waves crashing against the beach. Riley must have come to the same conclusion since Jason noticed that she was already gripping her bow tightly and had nocked an arrow.

“Where did they go?” Eliza whispered, her knuckles white around the base of her wand.

“I have no idea,” Jason replied quietly, a sinking feeling in his stomach. They couldn’t afford to lose the undead sailors. Without them, they didn’t have an easy way to return to Falcon’s Hook. His dark mana flared as he considered what he would do if any harm had come to Frank or his crew. “But we’re going to find out.”

Chapter 15 - Hunted

Claire sat at a small café nursing a cup of tea. She was sitting at a table on the restaurant's outdoor patio, watching as people walked past on the street nearby. Since she was downtown, everyone was well-dressed and moving at a harried pace – likely trying to get back to their offices and the endless list of tasks they needed to complete.

For a brief moment, Claire wished she could return to her own office. She considered waving her Core across the payment terminal installed in the center of the table and leaving. Maybe she had made a mistake in approaching Gloria.

"Hello Ms. Thompson," a voice interrupted her thoughts. Claire glanced up to find Gloria Bastion standing beside her table, the older woman scrutinizing her carefully.

"Gloria," Claire offered in greeting. "Why don't you take a seat?"

The older woman sat down delicately, her back rigid. She promptly waved a hand across the surface of the table, and a screen appeared. Gloria ordered a coffee and then dismissed the display with a flick of her wrist. The pair sat in silence for a few minutes, Claire waiting for Gloria to speak first.

"After our meeting a few days ago, I have undertaken an audit of our files and the original CPSC trial of the game system. Your report on the incident with the game master was also enlightening. In the process, I have noticed a few anomalies," Gloria finally said, chewing on the word "anomalies" distastefully.

"What exactly do you mean?" Claire asked cautiously. She was treading a fine line during these conversations to avoid incriminating either herself or Robert.

"The logs for this game are woefully incomplete. It is also unusual that Cerillion Entertainment has no real-time access to the players' information. Our game masters have complained that they have little information to work with when reviewing player conduct. In fact, it is clear that they are little more than high-level players themselves."

Claire hesitated for a moment as she considered how to respond. "Some of those issues are outside of the company's control. The hardware for the neural interface system offers a unique challenge. Since we have continuous access to a player's brain activity, there are significant privacy and legal concerns. You might even classify some of the information we are recording as medical records – which carry their own legal protections. This is why we were forced to limit even our own access to the players' information."

She took a deep breath before continuing, "Regarding the logs, that is a result of how Alfred operates the game world. He makes so many changes – many of which take place in real-time – that we were having difficulty tracking his activity in a way that was easy to follow. We had to completely rethink the way we handle versioning control and log system changes."

"I see," Gloria said, raising a single, arched eyebrow. A waiter stopped by the table, depositing a cup in front of the older woman. She sipped at the contents delicately before continuing. "Our staff has also noticed dramatic differences between the game world during the CPSC trial and the one that is now offered in the live version."

"Some of that is the result of patches," Claire replied cautiously. "Otherwise, this is also a product of Alfred making dynamic changes to the game system."

"Given our last conversation, you can see why I might find that more than a little alarming," Gloria replied, meeting Claire's gaze. "We now have some circumstantial evidence that would support re-opening an investigation into Awaken Online. However, we need more. Have you made any progress on your front?"

Claire grimaced, cradling the cup in front of her with both hands. "The records of the player being ejected from the game have been deleted," she said quietly. "I still have the logs showing the player's elevated neural activity, but I cannot prove that the AI was accessing his mind while he was logged out of the game world."

With a sigh, Gloria set down her cup, rising from her chair at the same time. "Well, then I suggest you get to work. That information must be stored somewhere." Gloria turned to leave but hesitated. "I know you understand the risk to the other players if you are right. I trust you will find a way."

With that last statement, Gloria walked away, swiftly stepping into the flow of pedestrians beside the café. Claire's eyes followed the woman as she disappeared into the crowd. She knew that Gloria was right. She just didn't know what she was going to do about it.

* * *

"I don't see any enemies," Riley said, sighting along an arrow as she carefully inspected the Marietta. The group had stood along the tree line for several minutes and yet the crew was still nowhere to be seen. "I think it's safe to move closer and investigate."

Jason nodded, and the group emerged cautiously from the trees. As they approached the ship, it soon became clear that the

Marrietta had been completely abandoned. There was no trace of either Frank or the undead sailors. Although, he did notice that the larger holes in the hull had been boarded up already and woodworking tools lay scattered across the sandy beach. After searching the ship carefully, Jason stepped back down the gangplank.

He found Riley stooped over, examining an impression in the sand. “There’s no one onboard,” Jason reported in an angry tone. “They just vanished.”

Riley glanced up at him, her fingers tracing one of the indentations in the sand. “There are a ton of footprints further up the beach – my *Perception* skill is going crazy. Not all of these prints look human either. Like, look at this one. Unless your undead suddenly grew clawed feet, I think those lizardmen were here.”

Eliza pointed toward the tree line further down the beach. “It looks like the footprints are all headed in that direction. Maybe the lizardmen showed up and took Frank and the undead hostage?” she suggested tentatively.

Jason glanced at Riley, and she nodded in confirmation. “There are no bodies and no obvious signs of a fight aboard the ship,” he added, rubbing at his eyes tiredly.

“Hmm. How many lizardmen must have been here for Frank to give up willingly?” Riley murmured, trailing off as she examined the footprints.

Jason’s stomach sank as he realized she was right. Frank would only have given up if the odds had been overwhelming. He knew how crucial the undead sailors were – they were the group’s ticket back to Falcon’s Hook. He wouldn’t have surrendered willingly unless he knew he couldn’t win. That didn’t bode well. Now there were only three of them remaining against some unknown legion of lizardmen.

And I have no minions.

“Damn it,” Jason muttered.

“What do we do now?” Riley asked cautiously, watching him with a concerned expression.

Jason’s eyes traced the line of footprints that led further down the beach. As he contemplated his next steps, he could feel a familiar chill energy claw and scrape its way up his spine. “There is only one thing we can do,” he finally replied. “We go find Frank and the sailors, and we get them back – one way or another.”

Riley and Eliza nodded quietly, and the group set off down the beach. After half a mile, the footprints veered back toward the tree line. Jason hesitated as his gaze shifted to the forest. A stone roadway had been carved through the dense vegetation. The rock was worn and crumbling, and the forest had begun to overgrow the road, yet the craftsmanship didn’t look like it had been created with the crude tools

he had seen the lizardmen using.

"Look at this," Eliza said, pointing at an impression further down the beach.

Riley approached the water mage, swiping away the sand and revealing a massive block of patchy gray stone buried under the beach. "Why are the stones buried?" she asked aloud. "And why is there a road here?"

"Maybe this used to be a dock of some kind?" Eliza suggested cautiously. "This might have been where ships anchored when they were visiting the island."

Riley and Jason glanced at the mage in surprise, and her gaze immediately dropped to her hands. "We're assuming that there is some sort of temple here. Maybe the lizardmen weren't the first ones to inhabit the island."

"That sounds right," Jason replied. It was consistent with the brief visions of the Keeper he had witnessed. "Let's keep moving," he continued, gesturing at the roadway. "Try to stay quiet as we move forward. The lizardmen might post sentries along the road, and we can't afford a confrontation right now."

With that, the group continued further inland, following the ancient roadway. As they traveled, Jason noticed that they gradually began to walk against a steepening incline, the road making a beeline for the serpentine tower of stone that loomed on the northern end of the island. He was beginning to suspect that this was where they would find the temple – and likely Frank and the undead sailors.

After the group had traveled nearly a mile along the road, Riley held up a hand. Jason and Eliza immediately froze, and Riley motioned quickly toward the trees along the side of the roadway. They just barely made it to the tree line before a pair of gargantuan snakes appeared around the bend in the road ahead of them. Riding atop each serpentine mount was a lizardman, a crude spear held at the ready. The two creatures hissed at one another amiably as their mounts slithered forward, the sounds vaguely familiar to Jason's ear. He thought he could almost detect distinct words.

They don't look very alert, Jason thought. *Not that I blame them with that tentacle creature guarding the island. Maybe we can get closer to the temple.*

"Do we attack?" Riley whispered, her hand clutching at her bow.

Jason's hand rested on the dark archer's. "Not yet. We must be close to the temple if we are running into a patrol. Let's proceed more cautiously once they pass and get a sense of what we're facing."

"What about Eliza?" Riley replied. "She doesn't have *Sneak*."

Jason glanced at the water mage, wracked by a moment of

indecision as he considered what to do. Eliza was a bit of a liability at the moment. Perhaps they could leave her here – hidden in the trees – while he and Riley investigated the temple.

"I might be able to help with that," Eliza began, sticking her hand into her pack. "I have a potion that can turn me invisible, but I only have one, and it only lasts for about thirty minutes. If I use it with another potion that increases *Dexterity*, I should be able to move more quietly too."

Jason's eyes widened in surprise, and he inspected the mage with renewed interest. The idea of an invisibility potion wasn't unique – he had encountered similar items in other games. Yet, with AO's heightened realism, utility items took on a greater importance. He would have been cursing at himself during the encounter with the players outside of Falcon's Hook if he hadn't thought to purchase some rope.

"That should work," Jason finally replied. "Will we be able to see you while you're invisible?"

The girl shook her head in response.

"Okay, then stay close to Riley and me. You might also want to give me one of your *Dexterity* potions too. I'm not the sneakiest person," he added with a grin.

Eliza kept burrowing in her pack in search of the potions. A moment later, she pulled out three vials. Two glowed a sickly green, and the other seemed to be empty. She handed one of the emerald potions to Jason, and he promptly popped the cork and downed the concoction. It was only after he had swallowed the contents that he considered that it might be poisonous. Yet his nervousness eased as he saw a notification appear in his peripheral vision.

System Notice

Your *Dexterity* has been increased by 100 for the next hour. Your blood toxicity has also increased by 15%. You may experience some secondary effects from the potion.

Jason raised an eyebrow at the mention of "blood toxicity." He hadn't seen that sort of notice before when using regular health potions. Was that a way for the game to restrict how many enhancement potions a player could consume? He decided to shelve that question for later as he saw the lizardmen patrol disappear down the road in the direction of the beach.

Eliza unstopped her two potions and swallowed them quickly, her nose scrunching up with distaste at the bitter flavor. Then her skin began to shimmer and slowly turn transparent. A moment later, the water mage had disappeared entirely – two foot-shaped impressions in the dirt the only evidence that she still stood beside them.

"That's a cool trick!" Riley whispered. "Remind me to order some of those potions when we get back."

"They're rather difficult to make," Eliza replied, her voice seemingly coming from nowhere. "Alma only had a few Chameleon Cloves. We would have to go find more."

Riley smiled in the girl's direction. "Well, I'm willing to go hunting if those things can turn me completely invisible."

"I may take you up on that," Eliza replied.

"Okay, the lizardmen are gone. Let's go," Jason interjected.

Riley and Jason immediately dropped into *Sneak* and started moving along the roadway. The pair now hugged the tree line, ready to dart for cover if another patrol passed.

A few minutes later, the group rounded another bend in the roadway. The temple itself loomed before them – a collection of massive stone blocks piled high to form a makeshift wall. An arched passage had been carved into the barrier, two lizardmen standing guard beside the entrance. Behind the hulking creatures, the serpentine spire towered into the sky, casting a long shadow along the road.

More disconcerting were the stakes that had been planted into the ground around the wall. Atop each wooden spear hung a bleached white skull – a distinctly human-looking skull. Jason supposed that answered one of the questions that had been bothering him. Some explorers must have made it through the mists, only to be slain by the lizardmen. Perhaps Lord Baen's son had met a similar end. It also seemed like compelling evidence that these creatures were not friendly. Although, kidnapping Frank and the undead sailors had already tipped them off on that point.

As Jason looked at the walls of the temple, the image suddenly blurred and stuttered, a strange scene overlapping the one before him as the Keeper's vision took hold once more.

He walked with unsteady steps along a stone roadway. In contrast to the crumbling wreckage that Jason had witnessed only moments before, the stones were still intact, and the forest's dense vegetation had been carefully trimmed back away from the road.

Jason flinched as a stabbing pain rippled through his abdomen. It was growing worse with each passing minute. He reached a tentative hand toward his stomach, his fingers coming away covered in slick black blood. Jason quickly wiped the offending substance on the hem of his cloak. It

wouldn't do to let Noah know of his injury, and there wasn't anything to be done without healing supplies. They had been forced to leave the ship in a hurry and had only barely made it to the island. Besides, they had enough to worry about at the moment.

The fate of their race hung in the balance.

"The humans have reached the shore," his son reported, breathing heavily and glancing anxiously over his shoulder toward the beach behind them. "It looks like they brought three full battalions."

Jason could detect the hopelessness in Noah's voice. "Likely, they plan to complete the Purge. We must keep moving forward. If we can reach the temple and activate its defenses, the relic will be safe." He patted his hand against the book hidden underneath his cloak.

"So you say," Noah scoffed. "Yet that capricious god doesn't seem to be the type to plan for defense. Wouldn't he just accept his own defeat?" His son spoke the word "accept" with poorly-concealed disgust.

"Then we will have to rely on hope. We have little choice at this point," Jason said quietly, his voice hoarse with age and pain. He could feel his own end nearing. He just hoped that he had enough time to complete his goal – to protect the Kin.

As quickly as the vision overcame him, it abruptly vanished. Jason was left blinking in confusion, staring once again at the lizardmen guarding the entrance to the temple. Riley was watching him expectantly. He must have missed her last question while under the throes of the vision.

"What did you say?" Jason asked.

"Do we go through them or around them?" Riley whispered quietly, her brow furrowed in confusion as she examined Jason closely.

Instead of answering Riley, Jason glanced around them. A moment later, his *Perception* skill highlighted the impression of Eliza's footprints a few feet away. "Eliza, are you here?"

"Yes," the girl replied timidly.

"Can you inspect the lizards?"

"Give me a second," Eliza said distractedly. A moment passed before she spoke up again, "High constitution and strength, quite a large health pool and, I'm also picking up a resistance to poison." The water mage said this last part a bit despondently.

"Well, damn," Jason said. He had been hoping the water mage might be able to knock out the guards with her poisonous mist. "I guess that means we need to go around them."

"We could probably scale the wall," Riley suggested, pointing west along the wall. "I could climb up and drop a rope for you and Eliza."

Jason didn't exactly have a better plan in their current

predicament. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

The group crept along the wall until the lizardmen guards were out of sight. Then Riley dropped *Sneak* and began scaling the wall. The ancient rock was riddled with cracks and crevices, allowing the archer to make her way up the surface quickly. A moment later, she disappeared over the edge of the wall, and a rope dropped down to Jason and Eliza.

“Invisible water mages first,” he offered with a grin.

He received a quiet chuckle from the girl – one of the few times he had heard her laugh. “Such a gentleman,” Eliza said quietly. The rope suddenly jerked as it was grabbed by invisible hands. Jason waited patiently until it stopped swinging, hoping that meant Eliza had made it safely to the top of the wall. Then he quickly scaled the rope.

“Stay quiet,” Riley whispered urgently as Jason’s head crested the lip of the wall. He tried his best under the circumstances, grunting softly as he pulled himself up onto the wall. It was in moments like this that he regretted spending all of his stat points on *Willpower*. A little more *Strength* would sure be useful right about now.

Once he was atop the wall, Jason surveyed the interior courtyard of the temple. He immediately froze, his mouth drifting open in surprise. The ancient stone wall encircled a massive courtyard nearly the size of a football field. Lizardmen filled the area. Crude wooden huts had been erected along the wall, and Jason spotted a few of the creatures lounging on the rocks, basking in the sun. Meanwhile, others cooked what appeared to be some sort of large boar over an open fire.

On the far end of the courtyard, Jason could see the façade of what must have once been the temple, enormous colonnades supporting a tiled stone roof. However, the structure had seen better days – rubble and debris were piled in front of the temple’s entrance. He felt his stomach lurch at the sight. It would take hours to clear the wreckage – assuming that the entrance hadn’t been completely caved in.

In front of the temple, a massive jagged hole had been gouged into the courtyard, with cracks and fractures radiating outward from the opening. Standing around the pit, their hands bound behind their backs, were Frank and the undead sailors. Jason breathed a short sigh of relief when he saw that they were unharmed. Maybe they still had a chance at making it back to Falcon’s Hook.

Several lizardmen stood around the prisoners, the tips of the creatures’ spears leveled at the bound men and women. Frank glared at one of the monsters and grunted against the cloth gag that had been stuffed in his mouth as a lizardman hefted the barbarian’s axes

experimentally.

"There must be hundreds of them," Riley murmured, her eyes skimming across the courtyard.

"Maybe more," Eliza added. As she spoke, the air next to Jason began to shimmer, the mage's body slowly revealing itself once again. The water mage gestured towards the side of the courtyard, where the temple wall abutted a cliff face. "What is that?" Even as she posed the question, lizardmen stepped out of a hole in the wall of the temple.

"I see claw marks around the entrance to the tunnel," Riley offered, sighting along one of her arrows. "Maybe the creatures dug some sort of cave to use as their lair?"

That wasn't good news. It meant that the lizardmen in the courtyard were likely only a fraction of the total population occupying the temple. It was clear that they were greatly outnumbered, and Jason didn't have any way to summon new minions. A frontal attack was obviously out of the question. Eliza's inspection had also indicated that they couldn't poison the creatures reliably. His mind wheeled as he considered how to proceed.

"Jason," Riley said sharply, pointing toward the tunnel carved into the stone wall.

A strange lizardman had emerged from the cave entrance. In contrast to the other creatures, this lizardman walked with slow, languid steps and the others parted before it. Its skin was worn and cracked with age, and crude tribal bands encircled its arms and legs. A crown made of bleached bones rested atop the creature's head, small ivory spires reaching into the air. The lizardman shuffled toward the prisoners on the far end of the courtyard, several other warriors taking up positions around it.

"Maybe that's their leader," Eliza suggested quietly.

"It almost looks more like a religious figure – sort of like a priest," Riley added, noting the way that the other lizardmen deferred to their leader.

"The real question is what the hell they're planning to do with the prisoners," Jason added.

The group stood in nervous silence, looking on anxiously as the ancient lizardman approached the captives. There was little they could do but watch at this point.

The lizardman leader gestured to one of the undead sailors, and two warriors stepped forward, grabbing the dead man's arms. They glanced down at their hands in what appeared to be disgust as pus drained from the zombie's arm – evidence of the zombie's decay now that they were no longer aboard the Marietta. They dragged the undead man in front of the ancient lizardman. The other creatures in the courtyard had grown quiet, observing the scene carefully.

“We makes sssacrfice,” the creature hissed, its voice carrying over the courtyard. Jason’s eyes widened in surprise. The leader placed heavy emphasis on each “s,” which made it difficult to understand its words, but it was definitely speaking his language.

“Asss it hasss alwaysss been, our god demandsss foodsss,” the creature continued. “In thessse timesss of hardsssship, thisss rotting one mussst do.”

With a sharp gesture from the leader, the two warriors shoved the sailor into the pit. Jason’s minion accepted its fate impassively, not putting up any protest as it plunged out of sight into the darkness. After several anxious moments, Jason still hadn’t heard the man hit the bottom of the pit. He could only wonder how deep it must be.

“What do we do?” Eliza asked anxiously. “We can’t just let them kill Frank and the sailors.”

The chill energy of Jason’s mana throbbed and pulsed in his veins as he frantically considered how to proceed. This wasn’t a fight that they could win – either directly or by using underhanded tactics. They were simply outnumbered. Which meant he needed to try something different. As he frantically considered his options, the semblance of a plan flitted through his mind’s eye. Jason glanced at Alfred perched beside him, the cat giving him a curt nod in acknowledgment. They really only had one option left.

“We need to negotiate,” Jason said quietly. “That’s the only way.”

As soon as Jason finished speaking, several of the former slaves standing near the pit exploded, their flesh erupting and showering the nearby lizardmen in sticky, clotted blood. Their bones whipped through the air in a frenzy, condensing and collecting into three ivory discs that shot through the air toward Jason and his group on the wall at the far end of the courtyard.

Jason rose to his feet while tugging at the lip of his hood. “Stay close to me,” he whispered to Eliza and Riley. Riley’s mouth was pressed into a grim line, crimson vines already stretching away from her irises. Eliza gulped hard, her knuckles white around the shaft of her wand as she adjusted her glasses with her free hand.

Then Jason took a ponderous step forward and off the wall. His foot landed on a bone disc, the platform wobbling slightly before adjusting to his weight. As his group continued forward, the discs rotated into position, creating a makeshift staircase that barely managed to support their weight. Jason knew this was technically breaking Alfred’s rules, but the AI must have decided to bend his restriction in this situation. At least Alfred seemed to be a fan of a bit of showmanship.

The lizardmen had already begun to recover as Jason’s group

descended into the courtyard. The warriors had taken up defensive positions around their leader – their spears leveled at Jason and his teammates. Jason noted calmly that more than one weapon was also pointing at the prisoners. Clearly, the lizardmen understood the advantage of hostages.

"Who isss you?" the lizardman leader demanded as Jason approached.

The bone discs swirled around him, his eyes glowing an unholy obsidian as he channeled his dark mana forcefully. Riley and Eliza stood to either side, their weapons held at the ready. "My name is Jason," he answered, his voice echoing through the courtyard, "and I believe you have something that belongs to me."

Chapter 16 - Diplomatic

"I will see you later," Alex called to his classmates. He hesitated to call them friends – he found that type of relationship to be less than ideal. In his experience, it was best to have leverage.

He hefted his backpack and headed for the front of the school. It was early afternoon, and most of the students at Richmond were still in class. However, Alex had scheduled his off periods for the afternoon so that he could get home early. He was anxious to reenter AO and continue his work. The Crystal Reach had progressed a great deal over the last few days, and he needed to keep up the momentum.

Exiting the front of the school, Alex took a sharp right toward the parking spaces near the front of the building. He could see his bright-red sports car parked under a tree. His car was a relic – a testament to a time when people drove their own vehicles, and they ran on fossil fuels. It was one of the few presents his father had given him that he actually enjoyed.

Alex hesitated as he observed a man leaning against the car. He appeared to be middle-aged and fit, a mottled gray stubble dotting his chin. He stood with his arms crossed, accentuating his broad shoulders and the muscle definition of his arms that was visible through his light sweater. He seemed like the sort of person that should be hefting an assault rifle, not standing idly in front of a school building.

"Can I help you?" Alex asked in a polite tone, resisting the urge to snap at the man for smudging the wax finish on his car. He had found it best when dealing with strangers to lead with the fake façade he put on for other people's benefit.

"Perhaps you can," the man replied. He offered his hand. "My name is Ryan Vance, and I work for your father."

Alex's thoughts immediately turned to the incident with Jason, and the insidious voice in the back of his mind suddenly stilled. It took a great deal of effort to control his expression as he accepted the man's hand. "Ahh, that makes sense. What exactly do you do for my father?"

A grim smile curled the man's lips, his unwavering gray eyes meeting Alex's. "Whatever he asks me to. But in this case, I just have a few questions."

"Interesting choice of location," Alex commented, motioning to the car. "Couldn't we have handled this over the phone or at my father's office?"

"You're a busy kid," Ryan replied in a relaxed voice. "Between your classes and AO, it's difficult to find a time to speak with you. I figured this might be the best way to catch you alone."

Alex didn't miss the fact that Ryan had implied that he knew his class schedule and how much time he spent logged into the game world. He would need to tread carefully here. "Well, I appreciate the thought. What exactly do you need to ask me?"

"I noticed a few odd transactions in your bank account on October 18th. It appears that you withdrew cash from a local branch bank here in the city."

"That's not really a question," Alex replied, forcing himself to smile despite the dull weight that had settled in his stomach. Ryan's questions were obviously related to him hiring those two morons to rough up Jason. "I didn't realize that withdrawing cash was an issue. Did my father ask you to look into my spending habits?"

"Something like that," Ryan replied with a grin of his own. "It's just that the withdrawal is unusual. You might not be aware of this, but it was actually the first time you have made a cash withdrawal in three years."

"Oh, really?" Alex said, his eyebrows arching in surprise. "Well, I think I was planning to go out with some friends later that night. There are some clubs in town that operate on a cash-only basis – if you know what I mean."

Ryan nodded. "That is interesting. Do you remember the name of the club you went to?"

Alex glanced to the side before he could stop himself. He tried to play it off as though he was mulling over Ryan's question. "You know what? I really can't remember. We hit a couple places that night. It must have gotten pretty wild if I can't remember now."

"No doubt," the older man replied impassively. He rubbed a hand at his chin. "I also noticed a couple of text messages you sent to two unlisted numbers a few days prior to the withdrawal. However, it seems your Core was replaced recently so I couldn't retrieve the messages. Do you remember who you texted?"

"It's really hard to say," Alex replied, his brow furrowed in thought. "I message a number of people. Could you be more specific?"

"I wish I could. Unfortunately, I don't have much more information than that."

"Okay… What exactly is this about?" Alex asked, trying to sound genuinely confused.

"Your father just asked me to check up on you is all. It's probably nothing," Ryan answered cordially. He pushed himself off of Alex's car, his eyes skimming along the sleek exterior. "By the way, this is one hell of a ride. You better be careful, you might get into some trouble with a car like this."

At this last statement, Ryan stepped away from the vehicle and started across the parking lot. It took most of Alex's considerable willpower to force himself not to glance after the man and get into his vehicle. Based

on Ryan's knowledge of Alex's activities, it was clear that he wasn't an ordinary employee. He might have cameras watching Alex even now.

As Alex drove out of the parking lot and his foot pressed down hard on the accelerator, a small grin crept across his face. Ryan clearly suspected something, yet there was no evidence to be found. Alex had made certain of that.

A gentle hand rested on his thigh, and he smelled a familiar whiff of perfume. "You did well, son. Let your father's watchdog chase his own tail for now."

* * *

The group of lizardmen in the courtyard bristled as Jason and his teammates reached the ground, many grabbing at their weapons and hissing. Jason held up his hands, his palms empty. "I would like to speak with your leader," he said loudly, gesturing at the strangely-garbed creature near the pit.

"Humansss," the ancient lizardmen leader hissed, disgust coloring its voice. The creature raised a hand and waved at the warriors to let Jason and his friends pass. The lizardmen tensed, the muscles in their arms and legs bulging. "Proud. You alwaysss think you can invade den with no consssquencesss."

Jason was surprised at how well-spoken the lizardmen leader was. Perhaps the creature had been alive when the temple had last been active. That might very well be the case since he had no idea how long-lived the creatures might be.

"We have no interest in your den," Jason replied calmly, stepping through the crowd of lizardmen as he approached the pit. The creatures reluctantly parted to let him approach their leader, yet their clawed hands lingered on their weapons as they watched the spinning bone discs floating around Jason with poorly-concealed anger. As Frank caught sight of Jason, his eyes widened in surprise, and the barbarian struggled against his bindings – grunting around the gag in his mouth. "We only wish to retrieve the people behind you and then leave peacefully."

"Peace?" the lizardmen leader snorted derisively, the bones of its crown clicking gently as it shook its head. "Humansss not bring peace. You bring death and dessstruction." The ancient creature gestured at the crumbling ruins around them.

"We had nothing to do with the destruction of this temple," Jason stated firmly, picking up on the implication of the lizardmen's gesture and recalling the visions he had witnessed recently. "That was

another group of humans long ago. The people responsible for this are now long dead."

"You all sssame," the leader insisted, its long tongue flicking at the air as it spoke. "You not ressspect our kind and you danger to brood."

"Your brood?" Jason asked, puzzled by the creature's word choice.

"Young onesss," the leader replied insistently, impatient anger coloring its voice as it pointed at the roughshod tunnel carved into the temple's wall. Several more diminutive lizardmen carried small baskets from the cave, the crude straw vessels each holding a large egg the size of a human head. Jason could see that they were placing the baskets in the sun, presumably to warm them.

Riley leaned toward Jason, whispering quietly, "I think the leader is referring to their offspring. She must be a female."

Jason nodded slightly. *Perhaps that means that this is some sort of matriarchal society*. *Maybe she acts like a priestess*, Jason thought, noting the way the other lizardmen hovered protectively around their leader and the odd garments she wore. He still couldn't identify their genders. *I wonder how many females they have*.

"We have no interest in your brood," Jason finally replied. "We only want our friends."

"Your 'friendsss' are food for god. We mussst protect brood."

Jason's brow furrowed again, uncertain what she was referring to. "What god?"

The priestess gave an exasperated snort, before waving a wrinkled hand at the ruined walls of the temple's entrance. "Sssee for yourssself."

Jason could see that some sort of crude drawing had been etched into the stone, but he was too far away to make it out.

He stepped forward toward the temple, causing the other lizardmen to flinch nervously. However, at a placating gesture from their leader, they let him pass. He noted with interest that the creatures seemed scared of the floating bone discs, staring at them as he passed. Perhaps the last Keeper had made an impression when he had visited the island. That was the only thing Jason could think of to explain their behavior.

As he neared the wall, Jason could see that rough images had been carved into the ruined walls of the temple. He suspected that the lizardmen had etched these pictures into the stone with their own claws. Several scenes were shown in order – which seemed to indicate a sort of chronological timeline.

Perhaps this is the lizardmens' history? Jason wondered. The lizardmen priestess took slow, ponderous steps toward the drawings,

her guards following her closely and creating a barrier between her and Jason.

"These drawingsss tell ssstory," the priestess said, a clawed hand tracing the images.

The first picture showed a dark ship crashing into the island's shore. Skeletal stick figures could be seen leaving the ship and heading toward a familiar serpentine spire where the undead met with robed creatures. They seemed to be on good terms. The next drawing showed more ships landing on the beach – this time a large number of humans disembarking the vessels. The third drawing showed the temple in flames, a familiar beast looming over the structure and its tentacles lashing at the humans. The final picture showed a roughhewn image of the ruined temple, humans being thrown into the pit in its center as tentacles curled out of the opening.

These pictures seem to match the visions I have been having, Jason thought, recalling the humans attacking the Keeper and his son. He still didn't understand why a conflict had arisen between the undead and the humans or why the Keeper seemed so desperate to hide the grimoire on this island.

Jason's gaze hovered on the image of the tentacle-wielding creature etched into the stone surface of the temple. He certainly recognized the monster, which could only mean one thing…

"The Tentacle Horror lives down there?" Jason asked aloud, glancing back at the pit over his shoulder. Riley and Eliza both took an involuntary step back from the hole in the center of the courtyard, eyeing it nervously.

"What isss that?" the lizardmen leader replied, cocking her head to the side inquisitively. "Our *god* livesss below – hungry and demanding. We provide ssssacrifice to stop itsss coming."

Jason shared a look with Riley. That meant that the beast was likely waiting at the bottom of the hole for Frank and the sailors. If the fall didn't kill them immediately, Jason suspected that they wouldn't last long against the Tentacle Horror. They had only barely escaped the creature back aboard the Marietta, and they had been in a much more defensible position.

An idea began to form in Jason's mind. He couldn't help but recall a quote from Machiavelli, "*Occasionally words must serve to veil the facts*."

"We have fought your god before," Jason began slowly. He didn't enjoy the prospect of lying to the priestess, but they had come too far to turn back now. "The creature bleeds like everything else," Jason continued. "And our group survived the encounter." His eyes darted to the towering lizardmen warriors standing nearby. "Your warriors look strong. Why don't you try to slay this *god*?"

The lizardmen leader shook her head violently, and Jason noticed that the other lizardmen stirred nervously, picking up on her anxiety. “Many tried. They all failed. Our warriorsss died. The creature isss too powerful.”

A small smile began to curl Jason’s lips. *Perfect.*

“I agree that your god is strong, but would you slay it if you could?” Jason asked. “That seems like the best way to protect your people and your brood.”

The lizardmen leader nodded, slicing at the air with her claws and her eyes flashing crimson. For a brief moment, Jason could imagine how fearsome she must have been in her prime. “Yesss,” she said. “We kill if we could.”

“And what if we were to kill this god for you?” Jason asked cautiously. “We have slain stronger foes and lived.” That might have been an overstatement, but the lizardman leader didn’t really need to know that. Jason had also neatly skipped over the part where they had almost died to the Tentacle Horror aboard the Marietta.

A considering expression swept over the leader’s face as she considered Jason’s offer. She glanced at the prisoners, then to Riley and Frank, before her gaze once more rested on Jason. A crafty look flitted across her serpentine face. “You kill god, we let you humansss live, but we keep prisssonersss.”

Jason frowned. *Crafty old wench*, he thought sourly. He noticed Frank wince, his friend likely expecting to be stuck standing next to the pit indefinitely. He might have difficulty logging off with his hands bound behind him.

“Fine. We only need the warrior and his weapons,” Jason said, pointing to Frank. His friend’s eyes lit up at that, and he nodded enthusiastically. “If you keep the others in your brood cave, we will return for them once your god is dead. Their flesh will rot if it stays in the sun,” he added, pointing to one of his original cultists zombies, its right arm hanging limp and the flesh starting to separate at the shoulder.

The lizardmen priestess tapped at one of her horns with a clawed finger as she considered Jason’s proposal. Silence descended over the courtyard as the other lizardmen looked on. “Isss done. Bring back tentacle asss proof. Five daysss before we sssacrifice dead onesss,” the priestess declared, her voice ringing with finality. As soon as she finished speaking, a notice appeared in Jason’s field of view.

New Quest: Over Your Head

The lizardmen took Frank and your minions hostage. Instead of

getting slaughtered at the hands of a horde of overgrown lizards, you decided to negotiate with them. You have agreed to slay the Tentacle Horror below the temple in return for your minions. You have five days. Yeah, you didn't overpromise at all…

Difficulty: ?
Success: Slay the Tentacle Horror.
Failure: Die to the Tentacle Horror or fail to kill the creature within the time limit.
Reward: Return of your minions.

Jason let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. He couldn't help but glance at Alfred in irritation after skimming the new quest prompt. He didn't really intend to kill the Tentacle Horror, but sometimes it felt like the AI was taunting him.

His thoughts were interrupted as the leader of the lizardmen hissed something unintelligible at one of the warriors standing near Frank and the undead. The hulking lizardman grudgingly sliced through Frank's bindings with its claws and the barbarian promptly yanked the gag from his mouth before massaging his aching wrists.

"My axes," Frank demanded, holding out a hand to the lizardman behind him.

The creature glanced down at the massive blades in its hands, then hissed violently at Frank before dropping the weapons with a clatter of metal and storming off. Jason could only imagine that this was the lizardman-equivalent of telling Frank, "*I hope you die a horrible death to our tentacle-wielding death god*." The warriors then began shoving the undead toward the cave entrance, Jason mentally commanding the group to follow their orders.

Meanwhile, Jason turned back to the leader. "How do we get below the temple to fight your god?"

The priestess' lips peeled back to reveal rows of sharp teeth. Jason could only assume it was her poor imitation of a smile. She raised one arm and pointed a clawed finger at the pit in the center of the courtyard. "Sssacrifice."

Damn it.

"Is there any other way to enter the temple?" Jason asked again, hoping that the pit wasn't their only option.

"No other way," the leader said with a shake of her head. She gestured at the ruined entrance. "Temple sssealed long ago. Rotting flesh too dangerousss."

"Rotting flesh?" Riley asked with a puzzled expression.

“Bonesss and beastsss,” the leader hissed, a flash of fear flitting across her face. “Warriorsss fighting warriorsss. We keep blocked to protect brood.”

Jason didn’t like the sound of that at all. If the lizardmen had intentionally kept the entrance to the temple blocked off, the creatures inside must be vicious. Perhaps these were the temple “defenses” that the Keeper had alluded to in his last vision. He could only hope that those protections had faded with time. However, none of that solved his immediate problem. It looked like the only way they were going to get into the temple was through the pit.

“Okay,” Jason said, rubbing at his temple with one hand. “I get it. So the hole is the only way inside?”

The lizardmen leader nodded, her eerie grin reappearing once again. He also noted that they were now surrounded by hundreds of armed lizardmen. Escape wasn’t really an option. Jason was starting to suspect he had been played by the cagey old lizard – who now had fresh sacrifices and the remaining undead in reserve.

“Great job on the rescue,” Frank said in a dry voice, resting his hand on Jason’s shoulder. “These guys were going to throw me into that pit, but now I get to jump in willingly! Really, you did a splendid job.”

Riley chuckled, covering up her laugh with a cough when Jason glared at her. “He does have a point. You didn’t exactly improve the situation very much.” She peered over the edge of the hole. Even her night vision was having trouble piercing the gloom. “So how are we going to do this?”

Jason glanced at Frank and back at the hole. It was rather wide, at least a dozen feet across by his estimate. They might be able to get the barbarian to use his new wings and do what he did best – a combination of hovering and falling.

Frank noticed Jason’s expression and the way he kept glancing at him. “No. Hell no,” he said, backing away from Jason and putting up his hands defensively. “I caved in that cliff, and I’ve acted as a decoy before, but this is too much.”

“What?” Eliza asked, glancing between the pair in confusion.

“Jason is going to ask me to carry us down the hole using my shapeshifting abilities,” Frank grumbled. “I just know that’s what he’s planning to do.”

“Do you have a better suggestion? And remember that you were the one who insisted on consuming that Roc’s corpse,” Jason reminded his friend. “Otherwise, we’d have some giant undead bird that could do this for us.

Frank just sighed in resignation. “No, I don’t have a better idea, but you are going to owe me,” he said, stabbing a finger at Jason.

“As always,” Jason replied with a smile.

With that, Frank grudgingly summoned his wings. The skin on his shoulders and back ripped open as new, spindly appendages appeared. Soon, a full set of feathered wings hung from Frank’s back, and he gave them an experimental flap. The lizardmen backed away at the sight, hissing at him as dust blew through the courtyard.

“Good,” the priestess said appreciatively. “You may die ssslower.”

“We don’t plan to die,” Jason replied evenly, meeting the priestess’ gaze as his dark mana pulsed and throbbed in his veins. Dark tendrils of energy peeled away from his skin, lashing at the air and causing the lizardmen around him to recoil. “We’ll be back, and you better be ready to keep up your end of the bargain.”

Chapter 17 - Bewildered

Alexion stood on a balcony overlooking the Crystal Reach. This was the highest vantage point in the city. Brilliant ivory towers stretched into the sky above the keep and offered an unimpeded view of the surrounding area. The walls of the room were made of a mixture of sturdy marble and crystal. Beams of light passed through the surface, painting a cascade of colors on the walls behind him as they refracted through the crystal.

Thin streamers of smoke were drifting up from the marketplace, evidence that his Confessors had been hard at work ferreting out the infidels in their midst. Since he had created the band of inquisitors and begun preaching regularly in the Lady's temple, dissent among the NPCs had dropped off sharply. Citizens were even turning on their own family members to gain the Lady's favor and bolster Alexion's crusade against the undead. It certainly helped that the Confessors also made an example of those that were caught betraying the city – publicly burning the traitors alive.

The player population had responded positively to his new taxes and restrictions. Looting had stopped entirely, and the market was again teeming with players and NPCs alike. His staff had reported that there had been a rapid increase in new players creating nephilim avatars now that the situation in the city had begun to stabilize.

To top it all off, Alexion felt like he had deftly put off Ryan's questions.

Things were going well – very well.

"You may want to think more quietly," a feminine voice spoke up from behind Alexion. "Your citizens may be able to hear your self-congratulation from here." The white-robed woman stepped up to the railing beside Alexion, placing her impeccably manicured hands on the golden banister.

"Congratulations do seem to be in order," Alexion responded curtly. "I managed to stabilize the city as you demanded. With little assistance from you, I might add."

"I can see that," the Lady responded sharply. "You have accomplished the bare minimum expected from a leader. Should we throw a celebration in your name?" She hesitated for a moment as her gaze lingered on the burnt circular patches in the nearby field. "Although, I must admit that the Confessors were a nice touch. I quite enjoyed the little spectacle that they created in my honor."

"I'm glad," Alexion responded in a dry tone, tamping down on his own irritation. He had managed to subdue the city's residents and seize

control with little help from the haughty goddess. He was beginning to wonder what value she added – other than to offer condescending, barbed comments.

The Lady laughed lightly. "What do I offer?" she asked, picking up on his surface thoughts and placing a hand on her chest. "I admire confidence, but arrogance doesn't become you, Sir Knight. You have barely begun to scratch the surface of the power I can provide."

"You've said that before," Alexion retorted. "But I have yet to see you follow through on your claims. It seems to me that I have been the one doing all of the work so far."

Despite his rude tone, a small smile curled the Lady's lips, and she promptly waved at a nearby wall. The crystalline surface shuddered for a moment before sliding to the side. Alexion saw that the hidden door concealed another room. In the center of the small enclosure stood a marble column, a bowl affixed to the top.

Alexion stepped forward carefully, entering the room and glancing over the lip of the bowl. He immediately held up a hand to cover his eyes as a brilliant flash of golden light erupted from the bowl, refracting off the crystalline walls in a blinding display. As the light dissipated, Alexion could see that a resplendent golden liquid rested in the bowl, throbbing and pulsing with power. The energy was almost palpable.

"What is this?" Alexion whispered.

"Liquid light mana. These wells were once used by the leaders of the Great Cities before the Purge. They offer the ability to collect and manipulate a certain type of mana, using it to power and defend the city. The mages have created a pale imitation of these wells, copying what was once the source of our strength."

Alexion reached forward a hesitant hand. In a flash of movement, the Lady was suddenly standing beside Alexion, slapping him backward. His back slammed against the crystalline wall of the room, and he let out a grunt of pain. "You idiot. I tell you that this well contains immense power and your first thought is to dip your fingers into it? You aren't ready to tap into the mana well."

"You didn't mention that it would harm me either," he snapped at the woman, wiping at the blood lingering on his lips as he struggled back to his feet. A glance at his system UI confirmed that she had nearly killed him with a single strike. "What do I need to do to access the well's power?"

The anger faded from the Lady's face and was quickly replaced by another sly smile. "Well, now we get to the point of my visit. This body of yours is unfit to wield the well's full power. You must change and grow. You must become a Seraph."

The Lady held up a finger, anticipating Alexion's next question. "And in order to do that, you first need to prove your devotion to the light and your individual strength. In short, my idiot knight, you need to

challenge someone much stronger than you."

"Who do you have in mind? Jason?" Alexion asked. He didn't fear this challenge. He had overcome all of his opponents so far with the sole exception of his nemesis. He would like nothing more than to crush Jason in battle – whether the well's power hung in the balance or not.

"You think much too small. Although that's not surprising given your… condition," the woman said, moving closer and tapping his forehead with a finger. "Still, your opponent needs to be more than merely mortal," the Lady continued.

She leaned toward Alexion and ran her fingers gently through his hair. A shark-like smile lingered on her crimson lips, the color vivid in contrast to the blinding white of the room. "In short, you need to slay a god."

* * *

The group landed at the bottom of the pit, collapsing in a pile of feathers as Frank's stamina finally depleted. The barbarian groaned in pain, the sound echoing off the walls of the subterranean cavern. Jason rolled to his side, glancing around the room anxiously for any sign of the tentacle creature.

His eyes widened in surprise as he took in the enormous cavern around them. Roughhewn rock lined the walls and stalactites hung from the ceiling – framing the massive hole they had emerged from. Yet, in contrast to the walls of the cave, the ground was built from smooth stone and had clearly been excavated by human hands. Along the northern side the room, the rock floor gave way to water, waves splashing gently against the stone surface. Sunlight leaked into the chamber through a large hole in the side of the cavern about a hundred yards away, and Jason could just barely make out clouds and bright blue sky in the distance.

The one bit of good news was that there was no sign of the tentacle horror.

Jason's attention turned back to his teammates. Eliza was lying on top of Frank, a shocked expression on her face. Riley had fared much better, immediately diving into a roll as she hit the ground to absorb the shock of her landing. She was already on her feet, and she offered Jason a hand up before immediately pulling her bow from her shoulder and nocking an arrow. Riley's eyes carefully inspected their surroundings, lingering on the water nearby.

"You mind getting off of me?" Frank groaned good-naturedly, trying to lift himself from the ground.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Eliza said, shaking off her stupor and standing up. The mage looked a bit shell-shocked by the sudden series of events, and she double-checked her packs to make certain they were still there.

"Where are we?" Riley murmured.

"Some sort of grotto underneath the temple?" Jason ventured. He gestured at the tunnel carved into the side of the cave. "My guess is that this is the northern end of the island."

"Hmm. This looks like it might have once been a dock," Riley said, inspecting the stone floor carefully. Several decaying wooden poles still crested the water's surface, evidence that a dock might have once rested atop the water. Riley eased back on the string of her bow. "Maybe this was a way for ships to dock directly under the temple? The buried pier along the beach might have been for visitors."

"Regardless, it seems like a perfect place for that tentacle thing to live," Frank muttered, pulling himself to his feet. His hands lingered on his axes as he looked around the room. "It would have easy access to the area around the island from here."

Jason noticed that the undead sailor that the lizardmen had pushed down the hole lay nearby, its body broken from the impact with the stone floor – one arm resting at an awkward angle. The corpses of various animals and lizardfolk also lined the floor of the cave, their bodies battered by the fall and their flesh already showing evidence of decay. They couldn't have been more than a day or two old. Jason noted that the lizardmen corpses looked scrawny compared to the hulking warriors he had seen above ground. Perhaps the creatures sacrificed their weakest members to their "god" when they had no other option.

"It doesn't look like the Tentacle Horror has been here for a while," Jason murmured, gesturing at the untouched corpses and his brow furrowed in thought. "Maybe we injured it during the fight aboard the Marietta?"

"Or maybe it wasn't hungry after eating half our crew," Frank replied sourly, still eyeing the water along the northern part of the cave suspiciously. "Either way, we should get the hell out of here before it comes back."

"I second that," Riley added. Eliza nodded vigorously from where she stood nearby, remaining mute during their conversation.

"Just give me a second," Jason said, eying the corpses. With a quick series of gestures, he cast *Custom Skeleton*, raising the decaying corpses of the creatures that lined the cave floor. Soon nearly a half-dozen skeletons stood ready. They were a motley assembly – many missing limbs and shuffling along with awkward steps.

At least it's something, Jason thought sourly.

“I think I see a doorway,” Eliza offered as Jason finished casting, pointing along the southern wall of the cavern. “Maybe it leads further up into the temple?”

“Only one way to find out,” Jason replied.

The group made their way over to the far side of the cavern, keeping a watchful eye on the water lapping at the ruined stone dock. Jason’s undead minions limped along behind them with an uneven gait. They soon discovered that a massive set of double doors had been installed into the wall of the cave, the wood splintered with age. If there had been any doubt before regarding whether this cave was part of the temple complex, the existence of the doorway dispelled any lingering skepticism.

As Jason’s hand reached for the handle, Frank spoke up beside him, “What’s that?” The barbarian was pointing at a mural above the doorway. The image was difficult to make out under the thick layer of dust and debris that coated its surface. Without warning, Frank summoned his wings once more and gave them a mighty flap. A gust of wind buffeted the wall, launching a thick cloud of dust into the air.

Jason coughed to clear his lungs, draping the hem of his cloak over his mouth. As the debris cleared, he could finally make out the mural. It was truly massive, spanning the length of the back wall of the cavern and stretching nearly a dozen feet into the air. The image was incredibly unusual.

“Is that a sheep?” Frank muttered, eyeing the mural with a confused expression.

“I guess it is,” Jason replied. A giant, fluffy black sheep stood on a dais. A throng of undead and robed figures knelt before the animal, offering all manner of valuable jewelry, trinkets, and food. Eliza gave a small yelp as she finally caught sight of the mural, and Jason glanced at her in alarm – noting her wide-eyed stare.

“Who the hell would worship a sheep?” Frank continued.

“Only the best and most honorable type of person, of course,” a deep baritone voice spoke up from beside Jason. He whirled toward the sound, only to find empty air. He couldn’t see anyone else in the cavern aside from his teammates and his minions.

“What was that?” Jason asked softly. “Did you all hear someone speak?”

Riley and Frank both nodded, and Eliza looked nervous, her eyes resting on the empty area beside Jason. “Who’s there?” Jason demanded, his voice echoing off the cavern’s walls.

No one replied.

Frank’s brow wrinkled in confusion as he glanced around the cave. Then his eyes rested on the mural once more, and Jason could practically see the light bulb go off in his mind. “It was probably just

the wind," the barbarian declared loudly, sparing a wink for Jason. "The real question is why anyone would create a mural worshipping a stupid, fat sheep. I mean come on. There are so many better animals to choose from. Lions, eagles, bears, elemental hydras…" Frank began listing creatures on his fingers.

"Blasphemy. Absolute blasphemy!" the strange voice spoke up again.

Before the group could react, a young man suddenly appeared beside Jason and stormed toward Frank. He must have been in his mid-twenties, thick stubble covered his chin, and his clothes seemed to be made of a chaotic collection of multicolored rags. Rough sandals adorned his feet, their straps crisscrossing up his calves.

The strange man stabbed a finger at Frank. "How dare you say those mean things about Fluffy! He is very sensitive about his appearance, and we've spent a lot of time working on his self-esteem. Comments like that are just cruel."

Frank looked flabbergasted, his mouth opening and closing several times as the odd-looking young man continued his tirade. Jason heard a soft bleat beside him and turned to find a familiar (but much smaller) black sheep leaning against Eliza, its eyes rolling back as the water mage cautiously scratched his head, her helpless gaze shifting back and forth between the strange man and the animal.

Certain pieces began to fall into place as Jason watched Eliza. She didn't seem too surprised by the young man's sudden appearance, and the sheep certainly seemed to know her. Jason had thought that the girl might be a little crazy with the way she kept murmuring to herself, but maybe something more was going on here.

"Eliza, who is this?" Jason asked quietly.

The water mage glanced at him with a worried expression, opening her mouth to respond. Before she had a chance to answer, the strange young man whirled, spreading his arms wide. "You don't even know who I am? And to think that you're standing in my temple!" He strode back toward Jason, stopping to pet the sheep. "Can you believe these ungrateful people, Fluffy? They injure our guardian, insult your greatness, and break into my temple – all without even knowing my name."

"Uh, maybe we can start over," Jason offered cautiously, glancing at his teammates and noticing that both Frank and Riley had begun to draw their weapons. He gestured for them to wait. "My name is Jason."

"I'm well aware," the young man drawled, glancing at Jason with a bored expression. "I happen to know who *you* are. You are that old fuddy duddy's avatar. As for starting over, I don't think that would be appropriate. You all haven't even begun yet."

Eliza gave a frustrated sigh. “Why do you always have to be so difficult?” the girl demanded before turning back to the group, her finger pushing at her glasses. “This person calls himself the *Hippie*,” she explained to Jason and his friends. “He *claims* that he is some sort of god.”

What is going on here? Jason couldn’t help but glance at Alfred where he stood sedately nearby. Yet the cat’s impassive expression didn’t offer any clues.

It was the water mage’s turn to storm toward the strange young man, glaring at him. “He and Fluffy have been harassing me ever since I started playing this game.” Fluffy gave the girl a woeful stare, and her anger faltered slightly. “Well, actually Fluffy has always been really nice,” she amended. “But the Hippie is a royal pain in the ass!”

The Hippie placed a hand to his chest. “Wait, I’m royalty? Fluffy, did you hear? We’re royalty now!” With a flick of his wrist, a makeshift metal crown appeared in the Hippie’s hand, and he placed it on top of the sheep’s head, adjusting it carefully. “All hail, King Fluffy the Great!”

“See what I mean?” Eliza said in exasperation, gesturing at the strange young man. “He can’t ever give a straight answer, and he constantly goes off on these stupid tangents.”

Jason’s mind was wheeling as he watched the exchange. Normal players wouldn’t have been able to follow the group while invisible. He was beginning to suspect that the “Hippie” was one of the game’s six deities, which would make Eliza his champion. Yet the Hippie was completely unlike the Old Man. As far as Jason knew, the dark god had never appeared to any other players and had only spoken to Jason when no one was present.

“I think he may actually be a god,” Jason said slowly. “If my guess is right, he represents the water affinity. Which I suppose would make you his avatar,” he added, gesturing to Eliza.

“See! The guy dressed like a fantasy serial killer gets it! Even though, technically, I just said that,” the Hippie responded, making a face at Eliza before returning to Fluffy’s royal ministrations. The sheep gave Jason a pained expression as the god attempted to place a golden necklace over its head.

“The real question is why are you appearing to us now?” Jason continued, recalling his discussions with the Old Man. “I thought that the gods were supposed to avoid contact with travelers other than their avatar.”

The Hippie cocked his head to the side as he considered Jason’s words. “So many rules. My siblings just *love* rules. Yet for every rule, there is an exception. We just so happen to be standing in one.”

“Standing in an exception?” Frank asked, confusion lacing his

voice.

"Did someone say something?" the Hippie said, making a show of looking around the room as though searching for someone. He refused to look directly at the barbarian. "I could have sworn that I heard the sound of a stupid, fat sheep hater."

Frank growled angrily, his hands clenching around the hilts of his axes. Yet Jason waved him away. There was no sense quarreling with a god. "Is this temple an exception to the rules?" Jason asked, trying to clarify Frank's question.

"It is indeed!" the Hippie replied with a smile. "This is my temple – the last of its kind really. Can you believe I practically had to force Eliza to come visit? It's majestic. Sprawling tropical forests, crystal waters, and lots of mutant lizards… Besides, you lot haven't even gotten to the fun part yet!"

"Which is what?" Eliza demanded. "Just like every one of your other harebrained quests, this has been a nightmare. We have been attacked, half the crew was slain, the other half was kidnapped, and then those lizards dropped us down a sacrificial pit."

The Hippie looked a bit taken aback by her response, his expression falling. "Hmm, that does sound dreadful." He glanced at Fluffy, sharing a long look with the sheep. "We have been terrible hosts. We'll have to rectify that right away!"

"Maybe as a first step you can tell us where the Old Man's grimoire is? That's why we are here, after all," Jason said. He wasn't optimistic that he was going to get a straight answer, but he might as well try.

"That dusty old tome? It's in the throne room above us," the Hippie answered with a dismissive wave of his hand. "It's just three stories up from here."

"Does this doorway lead up into your temple?" Riley asked.

"Where else would it lead?" the Hippie replied glibly. Then he hesitated for a moment, cocking his head to the side. "Though that does remind me of something. I could have sworn I meant to pass along a critical message." He tapped at his lips with his fingers before shrugging. "Oh well. It escapes me at the moment. Which is ironic since you all probably won't be escaping from here – what with all the temple defenses being active and all."

Eliza rubbed at her temple with one hand. "Could you turn those defenses off?"

"I suppose I *could*, but what would be the fun in that? A good system of traps and challenges builds character, that's what Fluffy always says!" The sheep didn't appear to be saying much of anything. Once the Hippie had given up trying to attach a regal cloak to the animal's collar, it had walked over to the wall, curled up in a ball, and

promptly gone to sleep.

"Awesome. Now we have to deal with traps," Frank grumbled.

"And there is that odd wind again," the Hippie said, ignoring Frank and glancing around in confusion. "It might be helpful for the 'wind' to know that the temple's defenses have been fine-tuned to target sheep bigots."

"If you aren't here to help, then maybe it's time for you to leave," Eliza snapped, placing her hands on her hips.

The young man didn't seem offended by her statement, although he did turn to glance at Fluffy, noting that the sheep was now sound asleep. "Perhaps you're right! Fluffy seems to think it's nap time anyway. Toodles!" With that, the Hippie snapped his fingers, and both he and his pet sheep disappeared.

"What the actual fuck was that?" Frank demanded, looking at the rest of the group.

"One of the game's gods," Jason replied distractedly. The Hippie spoke in circles, but he had revealed some useful information. They were about three stories away from the temple's throne room – which might hold the Old Man's grimoire. Those intervening levels were also probably filled with traps if the temple's defenses were still active. That meant they needed to tread carefully.

"Why didn't you tell us that a god has been stalking you?" Riley asked Eliza, interrupting Jason's train of thought.

The water mage glanced down at her hands as the group turned to look at her. Her anger seemed to have evaporated now that the Hippie was gone. "I didn't really think he was a god," Eliza replied softly. "And would you all have believed me if I had explained that an invisible man and his pet sheep were harassing me?"

Frank let out a chuckle. "Well, she has you there, Riley. That does sound sort of crazy."

Riley just shook her head in irritation, her gaze shifting back to the broad set of double doors in front of them. "I guess. So, what's our next move?"

"We only really have one choice," Jason replied. "I doubt Frank can fly us back up the pit and we're likely to encounter the tentacle creature if we try to swim out of the cave. Even if we could get back topside, a few hundred lizardmen are guarding the temple's entrance and our crew. Which leaves this," he said, gesturing at the doorway.

Jason stepped forward and rested his hand on the handle of the door. Immediately, a notification appeared in front of him.

System Message: Entering Unknown Dungeon

Despite the indirect and confusing warnings of a slightly unhinged god, you are (probably) about to enter an unknown dungeon.

Your respawn point has been updated and a two-week reset timer (in-game time) will apply to this dungeon. Any players who die inside the dungeon will respawn at the entrance within 45 minutes in-game time.

The prompt also offered Jason the option to set the dungeon instance to "private." His hand hovered over the window. He couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu – the scene reminding him of the time his group had first entered the dungeon north of Peccavi.

"You're going to set it to private right?" Riley demanded, a tinge of humor coloring her voice.

"What, you didn't enjoy being forced to fight an army of players last time?" Frank interjected dryly.

Eliza looked a bit nervous as she listened to Frank and Riley tease Jason. "What are they talking about? An army of players?"

"Don't worry," Jason reassured the water mage as he set the dungeon instance to private. "We don't need to worry about fighting an army here." As the doors slowly creaked open, he turned to face Eliza, a small smile curling his lips. "This time, it looks like we just need to deal with a capricious god and three levels of traps."

Frank let out a groan, his hand swiping away his system menus. "Unfortunately, it also looks like we might need to tackle this tomorrow. It's already late, and I have a test early tomorrow morning."

Jason glanced at the clock in the corner of his vision, realizing that Frank was right. He had been so intent on moving forward that he had completely lost track of time. "Okay, well maybe this is a good place to call it for the night. Just remember to be careful when you log back in. We don't know if the tentacle creature will return while we're gone.

"Will do," Riley said with a nod. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Yup," Jason said. "You know I'll be here."

Frank and Riley promptly disappeared with a popping sound and a flash of multicolored light. As Jason pulled up his own system menu, Eliza spoke up cautiously. "I'm sorry about not telling you about the Hippie," she said softly, not quite able to make eye contact.

"It's fine," Jason replied. "Like you said earlier, without any evidence, it sounds kind of crazy. Plus, I know from personal experience how aggravating the gods can be." He hesitated slightly.

“Well, at least I thought I did until I met the Hippie. It looks like you’ve had your hands full.”

Eliza gave him a small, grateful smile. “He is a challenge to deal with. So… is it okay for me to keep playing with you all? Riley seemed upset.”

“Definitely,” Jason replied. “I think this has just been a lot to digest – for all of us. I doubt that Riley will hold it against you, and you’re welcome to continue playing with us for as long as you want.”

At that statement, Eliza’s lips pinched into a thin line, a worried expression flitting across her face. “Great. Thank you,” she said quietly. Before Jason had a chance to ask her why she seemed so upset, the girl vanished in another flash of multi-hued light.

Jason stared at the spot the water mage had occupied only a moment before. He felt like there was more to Eliza than she was letting on. She acted so subdued and shy and yet one of the game’s gods had taken an interest in her. There must be more to her story, and Jason planned to find out what was going on. If nothing else, then perhaps he could learn more about the game’s gods and the recurring visions he had been experiencing. Just like in the real world, information within AO was a precious commodity.

With that thought, his gaze shifted to the massive doorway. He could see stairs leading up into the darkness, his *Night Vision* struggling to penetrate the haze. He knew he needed to log off and take care of his real-world body, but a part of him wanted to push forward on his own. He couldn’t afford to lose any time. Too much was now riding on this game. Yet he also knew he couldn’t do it alone – certainly not with only a few handicapped skeletons.

He could feel his dark mana claw and scrape its way up his spine, dampening his worry. He relished the sensation, reluctant to return to the real world and his problems. Yet he knew he was only avoiding the inevitable. With a sigh, Jason tapped his system menu and logged off.

As soon as Jason left, the Hippie reappeared, Fluffy standing beside him sedately. “Ahh, I remember what I was supposed to tell…” he trailed off as he realized that Jason and his group were gone. “Well, that’s rude,” he said to Fluffy. “They didn’t even say goodbye.

“Hmmph. Oh, well. At least it will be interesting to see how far they make it. We haven’t had this much entertainment in ages.” Fluffy gave an indifferent snort in response. “Ahh, I suppose you’re right. No one has ever made it past the first level, so I guess we shouldn’t get our hopes up.”

Chapter 18 - Befuddled

After she logged out, Eliza tugged off her headset before running a hand through her hair and putting her glasses back on. She glanced around her room tiredly, her gaze lingering on the mountain of textbooks resting on her desk. A familiar weight settled in her stomach, the ever-present worry resurfacing as she automatically started thinking through the list of homework she needed to finish. She hadn't been giving her studies the attention they deserved – and that her parents demanded.

For a brief moment, she considered just laying down and going to sleep. It would feel wonderful to put off thinking about her studies for a few more hours, but her stomach rumbled loudly, reminding her that she hadn't eaten in quite some time. Her bladder was also insisting she visit a bathroom soon. She had lost track of how long she had been logged into AO.

Groaning softly, Eliza pushed herself to her feet. She visited the bathroom and then made her way downstairs. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she could hear her parents' voices coming from their office. She tried to move more discretely, her socks making faint whispers on the wooden floorboards. Eliza didn't want to alert them that she was up.

The house's AI responded to the presence of Eliza's Core as she entered the kitchen, dim lights flickering on automatically. She quickly made herself a sandwich, trying her best to be quiet. If she could get back to her room, she wouldn't have to face her parents until they got home from work the next day.

As Eliza trudged back to the stairs, she heard her parents mention her name. She froze, hoping that they hadn't detected her. A moment later, their conversation continued in muted voices, Eliza catching her name again. Her curiosity won out against her caution, and she crept carefully toward her parents' office, hovering along the wall beside the door.

"This game is a distraction, James," her mother said. "This isn't the time for Eliza to slow down in her studies. Her college entrance exams are just around the corner, and her practice scores have been slipping over the last few weeks."

Her father spoke up, his voice a deep baritone. "I know, but what is the point of school if her personal life suffers? Her tutors and instructors have reported that she is withdrawn and barely speaks. Her friends never come by anymore, and she spends all of her time studying. AO and her garden are her only outlets now."

A short silence followed her father's words before he spoke up again, "Maybe we are pushing her too hard."

"We are doing what is best for her," Eliza's mother insisted, a sharp edge to her voice. The sound of her heels tapping against the wooden floor was audible from the hallway and Eliza could visualize her mother pacing the room as she spoke.

"What is a couple of years of hard work in the grand scheme of things?" her mother continued. "Once she finishes medical school and her residency, there will be time for frivolous activities like video games. Can you imagine what we could have accomplished with the same advantages she is being given? Private tutors, an accelerated and tailor-made curriculum, and only the best academic materials and resources."

"I just don't know," her father replied slowly. "She seems so much happier since she has begun playing this game. I hate to take that away from her."

Eliza could hear the creak of leather drift out of the study. Her mother must have taken a seat in a chair beside her father. "I understand. Why don't we compromise? We can give her another week, but then we pull the plug. Everyone needs a break every once in a while, but she needs to understand that her main priority should be her schoolwork."

Her father sighed softly. "I suppose that will work. We can discuss it with her tomorrow."

Eliza quickly backed away from the office and retreated upstairs to her room. A few seconds later, she sat down heavily on her bed, placing her plate on the comforter – her hunger now forgotten. The weight in her stomach had returned, and she felt nauseous. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, and she felt like she might pass out. She clenched her fists, trying to will the feeling away – to claim control over her own body again.

When that didn't work, she closed her eyes, desperately trying to think of something positive – anything at all. Immediately an image of her garden came to mind, filled with the happy hum of insects and warm sunlight. The lush green vegetation hung around her, droplets of water resting calmly on their leaves. After a few moments, her breathing began to slow, and she could feel her body relaxing.

Eliza opened her eyes, finally feeling back in control of herself. Yet frustrated tears still hung at the corners of her eyes. She had no idea what she was going to do, but she knew one thing for certain. She hated her classes, and she had no desire to go to medical school. She just wished she had the courage to say that to her parents.

* * *

Jason glanced up when his alarm went off – signaling that it was time to exit his virtual study and log back into AO. Rubbing at his

eyes, he wondered how so much time could have passed already. He had fallen into bed the previous evening exhausted and had woken up this morning and immediately started working on the assignments that Robert had given him.

He was beginning to think that the engineer was a sadist. What he had assigned Jason weren't so much lessons as programming puzzles. They were much more advanced than what Jason had tackled in the past. He had a decent grasp of basic programming, but he wasn't sure that he was ready for sophisticated matrices and puzzles involving strings and arrays. Most of Robert's assignments seemed to involve more math and number theory than actual programming.

At least the virtual environment made the learning curve a bit more shallow, and, after several hours spent beating his head against the puzzles, Jason felt like he had made some progress. Not a lot, but some. He would take that as a small victory.

"Now I need to get to work," he murmured. He pulled up his system menu, logging himself out of his study. He was soon standing inside the VR headset's blinding-white waiting room, and he reached for the door to Awaken Online.

A moment later, Jason was standing in the cavern below the Hippie's temple. He immediately glanced toward the water along the northern part of the cave. Yet there was still no sign of the tentacle creature.

"I haven't seen it yet," Eliza said from behind him. He turned to find the water mage sitting at the base of the steps leading up to the temple's second level, nearly a dozen bottles and vials spread out around her. Frank and Riley were nowhere to be seen, and his friends list confirmed that they hadn't logged in yet.

"Well, I suppose that's a good thing," Jason finally replied. "I'm not sure how we would fare against that creature. We barely survived the first encounter."

"Didn't you promise the lizardmen that you would kill it?" the water mage asked without looking up.

Jason stepped over to her and sat down on a nearby step while he watched her work, Eliza's hands measuring and combining powders too quickly for him to follow. "I guess I did, but I wasn't really planning to follow through. If we can find the grimoire and this water relic that Lord Baen mentioned, then we can figure out how to rescue the sailors and return to Falcon's Hook."

Eliza looked up at him, her brow furrowing for a moment. "So, you lied." It wasn't so much an accusation as a statement.

"Yes. I suppose I did. We didn't have many options under the circumstances."

Eliza nodded slowly. As she finished mixing one of her potions,

she pulled her wand from her waist. With a quick jerk, she tugged at the crystal embedded in the top of the wand. It flipped open, revealing that the base of the weapon was hollow. With precise movements, she loaded the vial into the hollowed-out wand and snapped the crystal shut once more.

"What are you doing?" Jason asked.

"The mist spell you saw me use back in Falcon's Hook is just regular water vapor. The spell itself isn't poisonous. Most water mages use it for concealment. I figured out that I can combine my potions with the mist and use it as a vector for the toxins. To make it easier, I had this built," she explained, holding up the wand.

"I can preload a potion using a special vial. When I tap this button embedded in the side, it forces the potion's contents through the focusing crystals at the top. See, I had the craftsman drill small holes in the crystal." She handed the wand to Jason, and he could indeed see that there were tiny holes bored into the top of the weapon.

"But wouldn't that only allow you to use one type of potion at a time? It seems pretty labor intensive," Jason observed, handing the wand back to her.

A small grin crept across Eliza's face. "Yes. That's why I had him make me a dozen." She opened her pack to reveal a large number of the wands, each with a different color band wrapped around the hilt. "I color coded them so that I could keep track."

"That's clever," Jason replied, impressed with what she had come up with. He was constantly surprised with how AO's game mechanics could be manipulated to develop creative weapons and strategies.

Eliza blushed slightly at the compliment. "Thank you."

Their conversation was interrupted as Frank and Riley suddenly popped into existence nearby. Riley spared a glance at Jason and Eliza, a frown creasing her lips as she noticed them huddled together over Eliza's potions. The water mage immediately began cleaning up her crafting supplies when she saw the pair enter the game.

"Are you guys ready to explore this odd temple?" Frank asked enthusiastically.

"I suppose so," Jason replied, rising to his feet and gesturing for his minions to start the trek up the stairs. He grimaced as he saw them hobble forward on their broken limbs. This was all he had to work with now?

As the group started up the stairs, Frank gestured broadly. "So, what are we thinking? Fire breathing dragon? Massive scorpions? Mutated, feral lizardmen?"

Riley shook her head. "My money is on something sheep-

themed. Maybe mutant sheep-lizard hybrids?"

As the group neared the top of the stairs, Jason held up a hand, and they paused. A lone door stood before them. It was in much better repair than the double doors they'd entered through, and a simple iron doorknob was installed on the front.

Jason's group immediately took up positions around the door. Frank pulled his axes from the loops at his waist and stepped forward while Riley readied her bow. Jason mentally commanded his minions to flank the door so that they would be ready to join in the fray if something came barreling through the doorway.

"One, two, three," Frank whispered. On three, he pulled the door open swiftly and stepped inside, his axes bared and at the ready.

What they discovered on the other side was a simple square room, approximately twenty feet wide and twenty feet long. The walls were made of large blocks of stone and lanterns hung along each of the four walls, giving off a pale blue light. The room itself was barren, no furniture or items marring the floor.

"It looks safe," Frank said curtly from inside, gesturing for the rest of the group to follow him into the room.

Jason was the last to enter the room. As he stepped inside, the door swung shut with an ominous bang. The group whirled at the sound and watched with wide eyes as the door began to ripple and contort before disappearing entirely. Soon, only smooth stone stood where the door had once been.

"What the hell?" Riley muttered, banging her fist against the wall. "The door just disappeared?"

Frank let out a short sigh. "Forget what I said before. It looks like we get to deal with an irritating puzzle."

"I humbly disagree. Puzzles can be quite entertaining," a voice spoke up from beside Jason. The Hippie had abruptly appeared in the room, Fluffy in tow. The sheep promptly trotted over to Eliza and gazed up at her expectantly. In response, the water mage automatically began scratching his head. "Games stimulate the mind. Plus, they help a person learn to control those other pesky emotions like frustration. You have to accept the puzzle and have the patience to learn its quirks. It's rather fitting don't you think?"

Jason ignored the god's odd word games. If he was presenting them with a puzzle, then what they needed to know were the game's rules. "How do we get out of here?" Jason asked.

"Ahh," the Hippie said, raising a finger. "That's a great question. The rules are quite simple. Each room is a perfect square with exactly two doorways." As the Hippie finished speaking, two wooden doors appeared along the eastern and western walls of the room. "The entry doorway will always disappear when you enter a

new room, and then the two exits will appear."

"That doesn't exactly answer Jason's question. How do we get out?" Eliza said, irritation coloring her voice.

The hippie nodded enthusiastically. "What would be the point of a puzzle if it didn't have a solution? There is only one exit from this level. Your goal is to find it. You know… before you die."

"Die? From what?" Riley asked, glancing around the barren room.

"What a silly question," the Hippie replied, cocking his head as he inspected Riley. "From the things people typically die from. Blunt force trauma, heart attack, disease, starvation, old age…" He continued rattling off an endless list of deadly conditions.

"Okay, okay," Jason interrupted. "So, it's sort of like a maze, and we need to find the end?"

"Something like that," the Hippie said, a broad smile curling his lips. "Anyway, good luck!" With that, the man snapped his finger, and he and his pet sheep immediately vanished.

"I'm really starting to hate that guy," Frank muttered.

"Just give him a few weeks," Eliza replied sourly. "He doesn't grow on you." This earned her a laugh from Frank.

Jason ignored their banter, inspecting the doors that had appeared during the Hippie's *explanation*. They seemed to be identical, which didn't provide any clue as to which direction they should head. Then a thought occurred to him and he pulled up his map. A hollow feeling settled in his stomach as he looked at the screen hovering before him.

"What's wrong?" Riley asked, noting his expression.

"Our *friendly* god forgot to mention that our map data doesn't update inside this room," Jason replied in an irritated voice. "There's just a swirling black vortex with our player icons. If this applies to every room, we are quickly going to get lost."

"We could mark the rooms another way," Frank offered. Like we could make a symbol on the wall to indicate that we have been in a room and which doorway we went through."

"That's not a bad idea," Jason replied as he considered the barbarian's plan. "I knew we kept you around for something!"

"You mean besides acting as your decoy and personal transportation," Frank muttered.

Jason patted his friend on the back. "We have to play to your strengths." Then he turned to Eliza. "Do you have a paint or dye that you can use to mark one of the doors?"

"I might have something," the mage murmured as she began rummaging in her pack. A moment later, she pulled out a small red vial and a little brush. "Do you have a preference?" she asked timidly,

motioning to the two opposing doorways.

"Not really," Jason said. "We're flying blind here. Just pick one."

Eliza hesitated, seemingly uncertain which door to choose.

Riley quickly stepped in when she saw the girl faltering. "How about the one on the right?" the archer suggested.

Eliza nodded quickly and moved to the eastern door, swiping a red "X" beside the doorway.

"You guys ready?" Jason asked. Frank and Riley nodded, readying their weapons once more. Eliza moved toward the back of the group, standing near Jason. At a nod from Jason, Frank yanked the new door open and stepped inside. The door led into a small hallway, another closed door at the opposite end. As the group entered the narrow corridor, the entrance door abruptly vanished, closing off their way back to the room. It seemed that the Hippie wasn't going to make this easy.

Great, Jason thought sourly as the group paced quietly down the hallway. *This prevents us from cheating by opening the door and inspecting the room on the other end before we commit to entering.*

Upon opening the door at the end of the hall, the group discovered an almost identical square room, replete with ominous blue lanterns and stone walls. The only difference was that this chamber was filled with broken crates and skeletons riddled the floor.

Jason noted that the positions of the corpses were odd. They were all humanoid and seemed to be leaning against the wall of the room. He stopped to inspect a corpse, noting that its limbs were all intact. This corpse must have been some sort of soldier in life, fragments of rusted mail armor still adorning its torso. He didn't notice any fractures or broken bones that might indicate that the person had died in combat.

That's weird.

As the last of Jason's minions stepped through the doorway, the entrance door shut with a bang and promptly disappeared. Two new doors then appeared along the walls – one leading back the way they had come.

"One of the two exit doors can appear in same the direction we entered from..." Jason murmured to himself. "Interesting."

Frank shook his head. "More like bullshit. Man is this going to get old fast – especially since we don't know how large this level is. Speaking of which, what do you think killed these guys?" he asked, kicking at one of the corpses. That corpse was adorned in more loose-fitting cloth clothing. Jason couldn't help but notice that the material was in much better condition. Perhaps that person had died more recently…

His thoughts were interrupted as the skeleton's hand launched forward and grabbed Frank's foot. The barbarian let out a surprised yelp as he stumbled, caught off balance by the sudden attack. Frank hit the ground hard. The skeleton promptly came to life, clamoring on top of Frank and raising a rusted dagger into the air. Before the blow could land, a bolt of black energy arced through the room, slamming into the skeleton and blasting its arm off at the shoulder. A spray of ivory dust filled the room, and Frank coughed as he scrambled back to his feet. Riley stood near Jason, her bow still vibrating from the release of her arrow.

All around the room, the skeletons leaning against the walls began to rise, dust drifting off their bones. They grabbed at rusty axes and swords lying on the floor – what might have once been their weapons in life.

"Put our backs to a corner," Jason ordered immediately. "Riley and Eliza stand by me, and Frank in front." As they moved into position, he mentally commanded his decrepit minions to form a buffer behind Frank.

Nearly a dozen skeletons were crammed into the small space, and a quick inspection revealed that they were all above level 150. That meant that they were not to be underestimated. The skeleton that Riley had struck was already pulling itself back to its feet. Its soulless black eyes trained on the group and the creature seemingly undeterred by the loss of its arm.

Frank lunged forward as one of the skeletons closed in, severing its bony arm with a vicious blow of his axe. The metal threw off small sparks as it struck bone, the material buckling and then breaking under the force of the attack. Yet the creature shrugged off the blow, darting forward with surprising speed and scoring a slash along Frank's ribs.

Riley immediately began healing the barbarian, using her health transfer ability to refill his failing health pool. She couldn't keep that up forever, and Jason suspected that her health drain wouldn't work against these undead opponents. Her abilities seemed to rely on enemies that had a circulatory system. His mind raced as he tried to think of how to tackle the monsters in their current condition.

"Frank, try removing their heads," Jason ordered even as he began to cast *Curse of Weakness*. He suspected that the spell wouldn't be effective against the skeletons, but it didn't hurt to try. A moment later, the needle of dark energy splashed harmlessly against the skeleton's ribs, not having any effect. Meanwhile, the remainder of the undead were already shambling toward the group.

Frank followed through on Jason's command. He lunged forward again, this time fire curling up the hilt of his blade and

coiling around the metal. The axe slammed into the skeleton's head, caving in its skull with explosive force. The blow was enough to stop the creature, and it crumpled into a pile of inert bone before Frank.

"The head works," Frank shouted above the din of battle. Riley hadn't waited for his comment, her arrows already filling the air and blasting through the skulls of the enemy skeletons. As he saw the enemies toppling around him, Frank rushed into battle, swinging both of his axes with wild abandon.

Eliza chose that moment to enter the fray, yanking a wand from her pack. A thin trail of mist immediately began streaming from the crystal embedded in the tip of the wand as her free had danced through the gestures of her spell. The vapor began to fill the room. However, instead of focusing on the skeletons, the mist clung to Frank and Riley. As Jason watched, Eliza depressed the button on the side of the wand, and the mist slowly began to turn a brilliant crimson. A few seconds later, Frank and Riley's health began to refill – the pair pressing their attack harder as they realized that they had a healer supporting them.

She can inject healing potions into the mist? Jason wondered in shock, his mind considering the possibilities that option might present.

A short time later, the last of the skeletons collapsed on the floor. Frank's arms were riddled with gashes. Even with Eliza's healing, he had lost nearly half his health during the short encounter. Jason's minions hadn't fared much better. Two had been completely destroyed, and the others were now in even worse condition. Riley's health was also quite low – the archer having been forced to use her own health to keep casting *Void Arrow*.

"Man, that was rough," Frank muttered as he surveyed the room, ivory bones now riddling the floor in piles.

"No kidding," Jason agreed. He had felt almost useless during the encounter. Most of his spells were ineffective against undead creatures. The only silver lining was that he now had some materials to summon new minions. Without their heads, they wouldn't be of much use, but at least he could repair his existing skeletons and start stockpiling extra materials.

With that thought in mind, Jason immediately began casting *Custom Skeleton*. He repaired his existing summoned creatures – replacing broken and missing limbs but not attempting to do anything fancy. Then he dropped the creation screen and handed a few extra bags to the less capable minions, ordering them to pick up the remaining bones.

"What are you doing?" Eliza asked him cautiously. She was staring wide-eyed at the repaired skeletons. From her perspective, they must have pieced themselves back together in a whirlwind of

bone as he used the spell creation panel.

"Preparing for future encounters," Jason replied evenly. "We have no idea what we might have to deal with in the other rooms, but there is no sense letting the bones go to waste."

"Speaking of which, are you guys ready for the next room?" Frank asked, gesturing to one of the doors.

"As ready as we can be I guess," Jason said, noting that his minions had nearly finished gathering the bones.

With that, Eliza stepped forward and painted another red mark beside the door. At a nod from Jason, the group raised their weapons. Frank ripped the door open and the group barreled through the doorway. He had no idea what they might find in the next room, but one thing was certain. This *puzzle* was going to take a long time to complete.

Chapter 19 - Loopy

"You want me to kill a god?" Alexion asked in an incredulous tone. He just stared at the Lady, trying to determine if she was toying with him.

"I didn't stutter," the woman snapped, shifting her gaze from the city far below the Keep's balcony and back to Alexion. "Of course, if you aren't up to the task, then I can certainly find someone more capable. There is no shortage of travelers with ambition."

"I'm not saying I won't try," Alexion amended quickly, even though it pained him to capitulate to the irritating woman. The insidious voice in the back of his mind railed at his weakness.

"Good," the Lady replied. With a wave of her hand, the crystalline panel beside them shifted, slamming shut and obscuring the mana well from view once more. "In that case, we should discuss the details.

"Your task is to slay the incarnation of dark mana," the Lady explained. "I imagine at this point that even you realize that Jason is the dark god's avatar in this world – just as you are mine. Striking a blow against that insipid old fool will place us firmly in the lead."

Alexion shook his head in confusion. "In the lead?"

"Don't worry your silly little head over such matters. You can leave the heavy lifting to me," the Lady added, patting Alexion on the shoulder. "You need only concern yourself with the how – not the why."

The voice in the back of Alexion's mind urged him to lash out at the woman for her insolence, but he forcefully pushed it aside. For now, he needed the Lady. If she could grant him access to the mana well, then he would need to suffer through her condescension. "Then how do you suggest I go about killing a god?"

The woman snorted delicately. "One step at a time, Sir Knight. The question you should be asking is how you would even go about finding a god. We're not exactly easy to pin down."

She held up a finger to ward off his next question. "However, like every other creature, you just need to use the right bait. In our case, we feed off the emotions specific to our affinity. The Dark One revels in desire and death. To create an effective lure, you will need to capitalize on that."

"What exactly are you suggesting?" Alexion asked, his mind racing. "If it's just a matter of killing a few people, we can accomplish that easily."

"I am not speaking of slaying a dozen or so humans. I am talking about hundreds of deaths – creating a miasma of destruction in pursuit of your own power that the Dark One simply cannot ignore."

Alexion's gaze moved once more to the city below them. He could see NPCs and players streaming down the streets. He certainly had access

to plenty of future corpses, yet his city had barely made it through the transition to the Crystal Reach, and his population was only beginning to recover. If war broke out with the Twilight Throne, he would need able-bodied NPCs to fill his ranks.

"Using our own people would be foolish," the Lady commented, following his gaze. "Perhaps there are other avenues available to you…" She trailed off, looking pointedly at the funeral pyres that his confessors had erected near the market.

"Are you suggesting that I use Gracien again?" Alexion asked, picking up on the subtext of the Lady's suggestion. "How would that provide the sacrifices we would need to lure in the Dark One?"

"He is a fire mage, blinded by his own passion and ambition. I am sure you can find a way to use that against him," the Lady said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Alexion gritted his teeth in frustration. It was just like the Lady to offer a ridiculous objective with only a vague hint of how to accomplish it – all while making him feel like a fool for not seeing the solution immediately. Yet the image of the mana well and its power still burned in Alexion's mind. With that kind of strength, even Jason wouldn't be able to stand before his armies. He would give anything to see the Twilight Throne burn.

"Let's assume I find your sacrifices," Alexion began, "and that we were able to attract the attention of the Dark One. What then? Is it your plan that I face a god alone?"

"Are you nervous?" the Lady asked with a smirk.

"No, though I have seen what he is capable of. The events in the Twilight Throne and Vaerwald are sufficient proof of his strength."

The Lady met Alexion's gaze evenly, her eyes glowing with golden power. "You just leave that to me, Sir Knight. If you are able to draw in the Dark One, I will give you the means to restrain him temporarily. Then you need only do what you do best – eliminate the competition."

* * *

Frank's axe collided with the skeleton's head with a sickening crunch, resulting in an explosion of bone fragments and ivory dust. The barbarian promptly kicked the now headless corpse, and the creature's bones broke apart and scattered across the floor.

"That's the last of them," Frank declared, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

"At least for this room," Riley added in a tired voice. With the conflict over, she took a seat along one of the room's walls next to

Eliza. The water mage automatically handed her a healing potion, and Riley downed the contents.

Jason could understand their fatigue. The group had searched a few dozen rooms over the last few hours. Each one was exactly the same size, and most were filled with undead that would lazily rise to their feet if their bodies were disturbed. His eyes habitually searched the walls of this particular room, and he hesitated as he saw a small red "x" against one wall.

Fantastic, he thought sarcastically. *We've been here before*.

Jason slumped against a wall. The marks indicated whether they had been to a room and which door they had chosen previously, but they didn't exactly help them solve the puzzle. For example, the two exit doors for this room had appeared along unmarked walls so they would still need to head in an unknown direction. Without knowing how many rooms there were on this floor of the temple or which direction they were heading, it felt like they were wandering randomly.

Noticing that his teammates were taking a break, Jason decided to pull up his notifications, a string of windows cascading in front of him.

x6 Level Up!
You have (35) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Mana Mastery
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 2
Effect 1: -6.5% to mana cost.
Effect 2: +1.5% faster casting rate.

x1 Spell Rank Up: Custom Skeleton
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 5
Effect 1: You may raise a custom skeleton using nearby bones. The skeleton's level is calculated as the caster's level + Willpower/67.
Effect 2: Mana cost reduced by 7.0%.

x1 Skill Rank: Summoning Mastery
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 6
Effect: 24% increased stats for summoned undead and 24% increase to effective Willpower for purposes of determining Control Limit.
Effect 2: You may now communicate with your minions telepathically. Distance limit unknown.

At least I'm leveling pretty well, Jason thought. The poorly-armored skeletons weren't able to put up much resistance, and Frank had taken to dropping a few before they could even stand up. It felt a bit cheap, but it did compensate for the complete lack of progress they seemed to be making.

"It feels like we're going in circles," Riley said glumly, swiping away her own notifications with one hand as she echoed Jason's thoughts.

"Or maybe it's just because all the rooms look exactly the same," Frank added.

Eliza opened her mouth to say something and then hesitated, adjusting her glasses with a finger.

"What is it?" Jason asked, watching the girl closely.

"Maybe there is something else going on here. I… I was going to say that the Hippie tends to cheat," Eliza began, chewing on her lip. "He forced me to do a bunch of quests when I was first starting out."

"He *forced* you to do quests?" Frank asked with a concerned expression.

"Well, if I tried to leave or give up, I would often find myself back where I started. For example, he once had me go out to this bridge near Falcon's Hook. Every time I tried to return to town, I would find myself back at the bridge. It was just an endless loop."

Jason winced, rubbing at his temple with one hand. That wasn't good news. If the Hippie was cheating, then there was no way to tell if the rooms were physically adjacent to one another. Technically, the god could have been teleporting the group across the entire length of the floor each time they changed rooms. The same door might not even lead to the same room. On top of that, there wasn't an easy way to determine if he was cheating since each room was adjoined by a short hallway.

He pulled up his map again, hoping that it might be some small help. Again, all he saw was a swirling dark vortex with a few small green dots indicating the position of himself, his teammates, and his small group of minions.

"Damn it," Jason muttered. He was beginning to think that the humanoid corpses they had found strewn about the rooms were individuals who had simply given up on solving the puzzle, leaning against the walls or lying down and just letting death take them. Honestly, that might be preferable to their current situation.

"Maybe we should try something different," Riley offered tentatively. "This doesn't seem to be working very well."

"Like what exactly?" Frank demanded. "Without knowing

where we're going, it feels pointless to wander. The Hippie could just be sending us in a big circle."

"We could start numbering the rooms," Jason suggested. "We could then create our own makeshift map by going through each doorway." Even as he offered the idea, he grimaced. The thought of having to go back through each room they had already searched made him want to scream.

Eliza frowned slightly. "That would take a long time. Even assuming a small number of total rooms, we would have to go through each room several times just to begin building a crude map. If the Hippie is cheating, it would be even more difficult. It could take days to map the floor."

Jason knew she was right. The possible permutations through the maze of rooms were mind boggling even for a small set of total rooms. They didn't have time to waste mapping the rooms one by one. They had a finite amount of time before the priestess would begin sacrificing Jason's sailor zombies. He clenched his fists, feeling his frustration rising as he tried to consider other options. Without warning, he abruptly stood and began pacing the length of the room.

Eliza watched him walk back and forth, her brow furrowed in thought. "You shouldn't let him get to you," she finally said, her voice subdued.

"What?" Jason asked, turning to look at the girl.

She immediately glanced down at her hands. "In the beginning, every time the Hippie gave me a quest, I would get upset. It's unhelpful. Like he said when we started, part of the solution to each of his puzzles is learning to *accept* it – as irritating as that might be. Anger and frustration just get in the way."

Jason stopped pacing, staring at Eliza. She had a point. He was letting the idiot god get to him. He needed to think about this rationally. It also just so happened that he had one tool to help with that. With a thought, Jason forcefully channeled his dark mana, reveling in the numbing chill that washed over him. Immediately, his frustration began to recede.

He needed to approach the problem logically. His gaze rested on Alfred, who sat sedately beside Eliza, the girl absently stroking his head. As he considered the AI, a thought occurred to Jason. At its heart, this puzzle was a type of search problem. Robert had included a similar problem among Jason's programming assignments. He had needed to code an algorithm to search for all possible paths through a particular grid. Once he'd figured it out, the solution had been rather simple. He had created a primary search function and then repeated it over and over.

Jason's eyes shifted to the map window that was still open in

front of him, and the rough outline of an idea began to take shape. "Okay," Jason began, "what if we change tactics completely?"

"Sure. Why not? It beats giving up like these skeletons," Frank replied with a chuckle, kicking at one of the corpses. "What exactly are you thinking?"

"We have plenty of bones and materials at this point," Jason said. He had stored most of the extra bones in his minions' packs instead of raising new creatures since he was a little short on heads at the moment – Frank and Riley destroying them to incapacitate the skeletons. "I also have about fifty free spots left toward my Control Limit – more if I assign my remaining skill points to *Willpower*."

He took a deep breath. "What if I created a large number of minions and then used them to search the maze?"

"I may be a little slow, but how exactly will that help if your map isn't working?" Frank asked in a puzzled voice.

"Because I can still see the positions of my minions on the map – even if I can't see the layout of the rooms," Jason said with a sly grin. With a flick of his wrist, he projected his map into the center of the room. He pointed to the small green dots that were his minions. "I could program the minions with a search function, ordering them to move as a pack, pick a random door, and leave one minion behind in the room…"

"Eventually they would map the whole floor," Riley said. "Huh. And here I thought we were just going to have to carry you on this quest," she added with a smile.

"Thanks," Jason replied dryly. Despite their banter, he couldn't help but feel relieved to have even a tentative plan. "Assuming this works, it would be much faster than trying to map the floor on our own. Plus, once we have a rough map, we can check every room on the perimeter of the floor for the exit. If the Hippie is creating a loop by teleporting us to non-adjacent rooms, it will be obvious pretty quickly since my minions will appear on the far side of the maze."

"I like it, but what about the skeletons in each room?" Frank asked. "If your minions get taken out, that sort of destroys your map."

Jason hesitated, mulling over that question. "What if I created something small? Like the size of my hand? That way the horde could avoid the skeletons in each room. They don't seem to aggro until you touch them."

"I suppose that could work," Frank replied slowly, running a hand through his hair. Both Riley and Eliza shrugged, indicating that it was worth a shot.

"Okay, just give me a few minutes to build the new skeletons," Jason said distractedly as he began considering what he would need to create. "You all might want to back into a corner."

"What? Why?" Eliza asked.

Frank laughed at the confused expression on her face. "So we don't get stabbed to death by flying bones. You'll understand in a second."

With a thought, Jason ordered his current minions to dump the contents of their packs onto the floor of the room as his teammates moved back into a corner. Bleached white bones spilled from the bags in a torrent, rattling against the stone floor. As the seconds ticked by, the bones kept falling from the bags, creating a veritable mountain in the center of the room.

When the deluge of bones finally stopped, Jason's hands began weaving through a series of gestures as he cast *Custom Skeleton*. The world slowed to a crawl around him, his teammates' conversation slowing, and their voices deepening under the time compression effects of the spell. A moment later, they were nearly frozen in the corner, their mouths opening and closing ever-so-slowly.

A glowing blue panel appeared in the air before Jason, providing a comprehensive list of his available materials and his pre-saved designs. He sighed as he scrolled through the list of his previous creations. It was a shame he couldn't build something more interesting, but he simply didn't have the resources.

Although, that raised an interesting question. What exactly *should* he build?

His new creation needed to be small in order to avoid the skeletons lounging on the floor of each room. Ideally, they shouldn't be much larger than the size of his hand. Luckily, Jason's *Bone Crafting* was at Intermediate Level 2, which would allow him to cut down the larger bones into smaller segments. However, before he destroyed his entire stash of materials, he needed to create a working prototype.

Jason highlighted a skeletal hand, the appendage racing out of the pile and piecing itself together in the air in front of him. He swiftly removed the thumb and shifted the orientation of the bones near the base of the wrist to create a small body. Then he rotated the finger bones so that two limbs were attached to either side of the makeshift torso – shortening the appendages slightly to make them a little less awkward.

Once that was done, he realized that he needed to create some sort of head. His minions wouldn't be much use if they couldn't see where they were going. Jason had always been able to use a humanoid skull as a starting point. Unfortunately, skulls were now in short supply.

The first step was to merge the wrist bones forming the torso. The result wasn't pretty, but his skills were just barely advanced enough to accomplish the feat. Next, Jason grabbed a spare kneecap,

slicing carefully into the bone to create pockets for the minion's eyes. This took him a few tries and a lot of cursing before he managed to get the angle right. He ultimately gave up after forming one roughly-circular eye socket.

"What does this thing need with two eyes anyway?" Jason muttered to himself. He could have sworn he heard Alfred let out a short huff of amusement, but the cat appeared to be sleeping beside Eliza when Jason glanced at him.

He realized immediately that his new creature wasn't going to have a mouth. He didn't have the time or patience to deal with creating one. Instead, Jason began gathering tendrils of dark mana, rolling them between his fingers until they formed a tiny ball. He then gingerly inserted the dark mana into the eye socket.

The final prototype was awkward looking but effective. It vaguely resembled a spider – with only four legs to conserve materials. A few tests proved that the eye worked okay. The creature had no peripheral vision, and its depth perception was lackluster, but at least it could make its way around the room without bumping into anything. The creature wouldn't be able to attack or defend itself or communicate any information, but it would serve its limited purpose.

With the design complete, the crafting terminal prompted him to name the creature. "Drone," Jason said aloud, the word auto-filling as the spell saved his latest design. Finally finished, Jason sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly. He pressed the completion button on the terminal, and the spell abruptly ended.

"What is that thing?" Riley asked, staring at the tiny creature in the middle of the room.

Jason stumbled slightly as the time compression effects of the spell receded, pain pounding behind his eyes as a result of the extended use of the spell. "I'm calling it a Drone," he explained. "I should be able to make a bunch of these guys with this many materials."

He experimented with ordering the creature to move about the room. Its movements were a bit awkward with its gangly legs, but it could move quite quickly when it tried.

"That thing is super ugly," Frank commented, still sitting on the floor with his back to a wall. "Your previous creations were a little more… scary, I guess?"

"Well, it doesn't need to be pretty to get the job done," Jason replied. "I need to make a few more of these little guys, and then we are going to solve this damn puzzle."

He didn't know about the others, but Jason couldn't wait to see the look on the Hippie's face when they finally found the exit. He could only imagine the irritating man was laughing it up right now

watching them wander around aimlessly. The infuriating god had it coming to him, and Jason planned to show him what it meant to mess with <Original Sin>.

Chapter 20 - Devious

"What exactly did you want to discuss?" Gracien demanded, slamming his mug down on the ornate wooden conference table, amber beer sloshing against the rim. The fire guild master and Alexion were sitting in one of the many studies within the Crystal Keep, sunlight streaming through holes carved into the crystalline walls.

"You know that fast travel between the cities is quite costly," Gracien continued. "I had to pay a king's ransom to one of those irritating air mages to help transport me here again."

"I appreciate your time and expense in meeting with me," Alexion replied graciously. "I am certain we can arrange for the payment for the air mage's trouble."

Alexion nodded at Caerus who stood nearby, and the man excused himself to address the issue personally. The noble would likely return in a few minutes and listen in on their conversation from the secret compartment adjacent to the study. Alexion anticipated that Gracien would be more open with information if they spoke privately.

"To answer your question, I primarily wanted to check in with you," Alexion said, watching the burly fire mage closely. "Has Vaerwald's Council changed its tune after our little… demonstration?"

Gracien snorted in irritation. "They beefed up the fire mage patrols around the city, and there is now a permanent guard stationed in the field below the discs. Other than that – nothing. The fools are too scared of this 'Jason's' growing strength to do much more than shake their fists at him from the safety of the city."

He slammed the table again with his open palm. "The time to strike is now, while the whelp is just getting his legs under him. Our spies believe that he has found a way to increase his undead population. If we wait, we may be facing a legion of the dead!"

"Hmm. That is unfortunate," Alexion said, leaning forward slightly. This was the first he had heard that Jason was able to increase his population. He would have to investigate that himself. "And the Council continues to ignore your warnings?"

"They believe that I fear for the worst. They insist there is no proof that Jason authorized the attack on Vaerwald. As evidence, they point to the rising number of undead deserters near the Twilight Throne and the blossoming slave trade. Can you believe this idiocy? As though a group of disgruntled rebels would be clever enough to launch a concerted attack on the tube system."

"With the nominal casualties, I can appreciate why they might see it

that way," Alexion offered in a placating tone. "Primarily travelers died in the attack, and it is difficult to muster much sympathy for people who simply return to life after an hour." Gracien just shook his head in frustration at this comment, taking another long pull on his mug and wiping the foam from his beard.

"I wish there was something I could do to better repay you for your assistance with the undead slaves and forming the Confessors. Perhaps…" Alexion began and then stopped. "No, it's too risky."

"What? Just say what is on your mind," the fire guild master demanded. "I will be the judge of whether it holds weight."

"I was going to say that our original plan may have lacked ambition. Perhaps we need to demonstrate substantial casualties in order to convince the Council of the very real threat that looms at their border. Of course, I understand that you wouldn't want to harm your own people. If only there were a group that was more expendable…"

Instead of anger or outrage, a thoughtful look flitted across Gracien's face. "The lowborn," he murmured, his eyes flashing red for a brief moment as he inadvertently channeled his mana. "Only beggars and thieves occupy the lower levels of Vaerwald. I wouldn't mind seeing that filth purged from our city. They even assisted that girl in her attack on the Great Library."

Alexion managed to take the man's revelation in stride, yet the voice in the back of his mind screamed at him to keep going. "Hmm. That does sound interesting," he murmured. "Tell me more about these lowborn. How many people are we talking about exactly?"

* * *

A massive throng of skeletal spiders teemed and toiled about the room, their bony legs tapping incessantly against the stone floor. Jason had crafted as many of the Drones as he could and then set to work carefully creating a detailed list of instructions. He had given up on issuing simple verbal or mental commands and had brought up his in-game terminal, writing down the list of instructions in descending order.

His most significant challenge was how to deal with choosing an alternate path if the Drones reached an already-discovered room. Some testing had proven that the creatures couldn't tell each other apart and there wasn't a simple way to identify each room – especially since he didn't know how large the first floor of the temple was or its layout.

It took him longer than he cared to admit to come up with a

solution. He ultimately had to assign each minion a unique number. As the swarm entered a new room, a Drone was assigned to that room, and the remaining group logged which exit door was chosen. Upon reentering the room a second or third time, the swarm could then identify the room by the minion stationed there and choose an alternate path.

"Okay, I think I'm done," Jason murmured after scanning through his instructions one last time. He rubbed a hand at his eyes. It felt like he had been staring at the in-game terminal for a long time, and, at this point, the lengthy list of commands more closely resembled strings of code than a set of simple orders.

"Finally!" Frank exclaimed, rising quickly to his feet. He offered Eliza a hand up, the water mage looking at it skeptically before accepting his help.

"Now let's see if this actually works," Riley added, nudging Jason with her elbow playfully as she joined them. "I'm half expecting his Drones to spin in a circle and then start dancing."

"Have a little faith," Jason muttered in reply.

He ordered his minions to take up a position near one of the exit doors. The Drones skittered along the floor and crawled on top of each other in a miniature wave of clacking bones. As they reached the door, Jason hesitated to give the final order to his minions. He really hoped this would work. He didn't have a good "Plan B" if this failed, and they had already spent a considerable amount of time trying to solve this silly puzzle. He could feel the clock ticking.

Don't be a wimp, he urged himself.

With a soft sigh, Jason executed his instructions.

The Drones immediately swarmed the door. One of the skeletal spiders crept up the frame, its bony legs carving small grooves into the wood. As it reached the handle, the creature slammed down with two of its legs, and the portal drifted open slowly. The wood creaked and groaned in protest. The rest of the brood promptly poured through the crack and into the adjacent hallway.

A moment later, the door slammed shut and disappeared. Jason assumed his minions must have made it into the adjoining room. Two new doors appeared along the walls of the room they were standing in, but Jason didn't spare this much attention.

His gaze was riveted on the projection of his map that hovered in the center of the room. He still couldn't make out the layout of the floor amid the swirling black vortex, however he could track the throng of green dots that were swiftly spreading through the floor. As the horde made it to a new room, one spider would maneuver to the center of the area while the remaining Drones moved on to the next door.

Minutes ticked by as the swarm navigated the maze of rooms, slowly dispersing and spreading out along the floor. After nearly thirty minutes, the remaining group of Drones stopped in the center of the last room – or at least what Jason was hoping was the last room. The creatures must have exhausted all possible paths through the maze.

"It looks like there are two Drones left," Frank observed, eyeing the map carefully.

"It feels kind of anti-climactic that this floor of the temple is a perfect square, but I suppose it's also sort of fitting after meeting the Hippie," Riley added in a dry voice. Jason could indeed see that the floor was broken up into a seven by seven grid of rooms based on the locations of his Drones.

"What's the next step?" Frank asked.

Jason rubbed at his chin with one hand as he examined the map. "I doubt the exit up to the second level of the temple will be in an interior room," he began slowly. "They are all the same size and are too small to include a staircase, which means that the exit is likely located somewhere along the perimeter of the floor. Assuming I'm right, if we search the rooms along the edge, we should find the exit eventually."

"I have to say that you all are absolutely no fun." The Hippie's voice echoed through the small room as he suddenly appeared beside Jason. He stooped over as he examined the map, circling it with an irritated look on his face. Jason and the group jumped slightly in surprise.

"It sort of feels like you cheated," the god muttered in a morose tone.

Eliza snorted softly, unaffected by the Hippie's sudden appearance. "You're one to talk. I bet you had us going in circles before. Do you honestly expect us to believe that doors have been appearing at random?"

The young man put a hand to his chest, staring at Eliza in mock offense. "I will have you know that my character is above reproach. Just ask Fluffy. We have played tons of board games, and he has never once caught me cheating."

The sheep rolled its eyes at this remark before trotting over to Eliza and demanding its usual head rub. "He might not have *caught* you, but that doesn't mean you weren't cheating," Eliza said, glaring at the god. "I guess you're just going to have to *accept* that we solved your puzzle."

A flash of annoyance flitted across the Hippie's face before he could control his expression. Then a carefree grin curled his lips. "Touché. But I will remind you that this is only the first level of the temple. You still have two more levels to go, and the temple's defenses

are still active. I'll just have to make the next encounter more challenging!"

"Fantastic," Frank muttered.

"In the meantime, I guess we can just cut to the chase," the Hippie continued, ignoring Frank's comment.

With a wave of the god's hand, the doors around the room shimmered and disappeared, a massive set of oak doors appearing along one wall. A pair of heavy, iron handles rested against the wooden surface of the doors, and they towered ominously over the group.

Jason noticed that his minions had disappeared from his map. Before he had a chance to question this, the horde reappeared back inside the room, landing in a haphazard pile to the sound of scraping bone. A brief inspection revealed that the Hippie had returned Jason's minions with little damage. Although he still didn't feel like thanking the irritating god.

"Where does this lead?" Jason asked, gesturing to the new doorway. He was skeptical that he would find a simple set of stairs on the other side. The Hippie seemed to be enjoying their painful journey through his temple.

"To the second floor, of course!" the Hippie replied, spreading his arms wide and his tattered tunic flapping gently.

"Really?" Eliza demanded, pointing a finger at him. "You mean to tell us that there isn't some sort of trap or creature on the other side waiting for us? We're not suddenly going to find ourselves back in the grotto, are we? Perhaps with the Tentacle Horror lying in wait?"

The Hippie frowned slightly at the water mage, tapping his lips as though trying to remember something. "Well, now that you mention it, I do seem to recall there being some sort of guardian on this level. It has just been so long now that I can't seem to remember who I left to guard this floor…" he trailed off and began pacing the room as he muttered to himself.

After only a few seconds, the god stopped in mid-step, turning to look at Fluffy. "Ahh, yes! Fluffy chose the guardian. Do you remember who we left here?"

The sheep huffed slightly in response, shaking its head and causing the small bell affixed to its collar to jingle gently.

"Of course!" the Hippie exclaimed, slapping a palm to his forehead. "It was Felix."

"Who is Felix?" Riley asked in a tired voice.

"You all will love him. He used to be such an invaluable helper around the temple. He never seemed to get tired of collecting Fluffy's tribute and storing it. The process could get quite tiresome on our own."

“That really doesn’t help,” Riley began.

“Oh, speaking of which, just look at the time,” the Hippie interrupted her, glancing at his wrist. Jason wasn’t exactly surprised to see that the god wasn’t wearing a watch. “I have a number of errands to attend to, and I really should leave you all to it. Make sure to tell Felix I said hello!”

With that, the god and his pet sheep abruptly vanished.

“I really hate that guy,” Frank said.

“Try putting up with him for a few weeks,” Eliza replied, adjusting her glasses with a finger. “It’s even worse when no one else can see or hear him, and you have to pretend he doesn’t exist. I can tell you from personal experience that he never shuts up.”

“What do you want to do?” Riley asked Jason, pulling her bow from her back. “It sounds like there is some sort of boss on this floor – not that the Hippie provided much detail.”

Jason chewed on his lip for a moment in thought, his gaze shifting back to his minions. Right now, he had about a dozen regular humanoid skeletons and approximately fifty of the Drones. The smaller skeletons wouldn’t be much use in a fight – at least in their current state – and he would have to lean heavily on his teammates. He also wasn’t certain how to modify his minions since he didn’t know what they would be facing.

Jason finally replied, “We may have to play this one by ear. We can have Frank try to tank the boss with Riley providing support. Eliza should focus on inspecting the creature to identify any weaknesses and then support Frank so that Riley can focus on taking down whatever we will end up fighting.”

Eliza nodded before rummaging through her pack. She pulled out two small vials: one purple and one blue. “Here, take these,” she said, handing the potions to Frank.

“What are they?” Frank asked suspiciously, pulling one of the stoppers and sniffing the contents experimentally. His nose wrinkled in distaste at the smell and faint tendrils of smoke wafted from the bottle.

“The blue one will increase your strength, and the purple one will increase your total health,” Eliza explained. “They will only last for a few minutes, and they shouldn’t affect your blood toxicity level too much. Although, you might experience some dizziness and feel more prone to anger than normal.”

“Cool, thanks,” Frank said, smiling at the girl before downing the potions quickly. “It’s kind of nice traveling with our own vending machine,” he added with a chuckle.

“I try,” Eliza replied, matching Frank’s smile.

Jason couldn’t help but notice that the water mage was

becoming a bit more assertive – first in her confrontations with the Hippie and now with Frank. Maybe she was becoming more comfortable with the group.

Shaking his head, Jason forced himself to focus on the task at hand. “Let’s put Frank in front. My skeletons will take up position behind him, and Riley and Eliza can stand beside me in the rear.”

His teammates promptly moved into formation. Jason ordered his Drones to stay behind him. He wasn’t certain how he would be able to use the creatures during this battle, but he planned to keep them out of harm’s way for now.

“Okay, are we ready?” Frank asked, pulling one of his axes from a loop at his waist and his free hand hovering over the door handle.

Jason summoned his dark mana, the chill energy numbing the edge of his anxiety. This fight was going to be a complete shot in the dark. If they failed here, he doubted that the Hippie would give them a free pass back through his so-called puzzle. However, there was nowhere to go but forward.

“Let’s do it,” Jason finally said.

The group moved all at once. Frank yanked on the handle, the double doors whipping open in a rush and slamming against the stone walls. The group rushed forward, entering the dark room on the other side in formation. As soon as the last of Jason’s Drones passed through the doorway, the portal abruptly vanished, leaving them trapped inside.

Jason discovered that they were now standing in a large rectangular room, about one hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. The walls and floor were comprised of the same heavy blocks of stone, but Jason couldn’t make out much else. Darkness hung in the room like a dense cloud and he was having trouble penetrating the gloom, even with his *Night Vision*.

Before Jason could ask Frank to light up his axes, torches along the walls sputtered to life, casting a pale blue light across the room. The flickering flames cast shadows against the heaping piles of random objects that littered the floor of the room. Some of the piles towered nearly fifteen feet into the air – a panoply of gear, weapons, and trinkets creating precarious pillars of junk.

Yet there were no obvious enemies in sight.

At Jason’s gesture, the group edged forward slowly, maintaining their silence. After dealing with the skeletons in each of the previous rooms, they were now cautious about triggering an enemy. As they approached the piles on the other end of the room, Jason could see that there was no rhyme or reason to the motley assembly of items. The mountains were a collection of rusted metal

weapons and what might have once been valuable objects: chipped plates, reams of fabric, and the odd jar and urn.

"What is this?" Frank whispered.

"Fluffy's tribute, I guess," Jason answered quietly, recalling the Hippie's rather unhelpful explanation.

As they wound through the mountains of junk, the surface of one pile trembled. The group froze and eyed the mound suspiciously. "What was…" Frank began and immediately stopped as goblets and old coins tumbled down the surface of the mound, clattering against the stone floor.

Then the pile abruptly heaved, junk erupting into the air and scattering across the floor. The other mounds of trash followed suit, a whirlwind of items hurtling through the air as though an explosive had been set off beneath each of the piles. A wild assortment of junk soon spun and danced through the air as the group dove to the floor to avoid the objects hurtling above them. Yet the objects all seemed to be heading for the opposite end of the room, a truly massive creature beginning to take shape from the maelstrom of scrap.

The thing vaguely resembled a rat – albeit nearly twenty feet long. Its face and body were composed of a roiling mass of equipment, rusted weapons forming jagged fangs and jutting from its back at haphazard angles. As the whirlwind began to peter out, the creature shook itself, junk cascading from its body and crashing against the floor. It took an experimental step forward, each footstep causing the ground to tremble, and it sniffed at the air experimentally as its makeshift whiskers twitched.

Two dark orbs of energy suddenly flickered into existence where its eyes should have been, rotating to focus on the group. Jason's dark mana floundered for a moment as he took in the creature, a heavy weight settling in his stomach. It looked like they had found the temple's first-floor guardian.

Chapter 21 - Cluttered

"This is strange," Robert murmured, his eyes fixed on the translucent blue screen flickering in front of him.

"What is?" Claire asked, swiveling to face the engineer and sparing a glance at the other employees around the lab. The control room was alive with movement, technicians working at their stations and typing animatedly.

"I just checked on Jason's video feed," Robert replied, glancing up at Claire with a guilty expression. "Don't look at me like that! It has been a few days since he's destroyed something or started a war. I was getting nervous," he added with a chuckle.

"Okay," Claire replied, sighing softly in resignation. "Besides the lack of death and destruction, what's so strange?"

"It looks like Jason is on an island near Falcon's Hook – an island that was only recently added to the game world. However, that isn't the unusual part. His video feed is intermittent. Like here is a segment with him walking through a jungle and then just… nothing. There are large gaps of time with no footage at all." Robert shook his head, his brow furrowed in confusion as his hands darted across his keyboard.

Claire could feel the ever-present knot in her stomach clench forcefully at this news. She could only imagine what their budding villain was up to – or why the video footage was missing. She couldn't help but glance once more at the ominous black towers that stood adjacent to the control room. This seemed like Alfred's work.

She hesitated. With her recent conversation with Gloria still fresh in her mind, perhaps this might be an opportunity to gain more information from Robert.

"I've also noticed some odd gaps in the player data," Claire began tentatively. "I thought maybe it was some sort of glitch or maybe the files had been corrupted, but even the backup servers were missing the data."

That got Robert's full attention, a frown now firmly plastered across his face as he swiveled in his chair to look at Claire. "Hmm. That is odd. What were you looking for specifically?"

"Crap," Claire thought, struggling to come up with an answer that wouldn't make Robert suspicious. "Oh… just some routine player data. I was trying to pull together the report for the CPSC. You know, because of that recent incident with the game master."

"Ahh, that makes sense," Robert said, waving dismissively and turning back to his terminal. "We had to code some hotfixes to power level the gamemasters. Alfred was fighting us on it. That might have corrupted

some of the user data – especially after Alfred integrated the player profiles for the game masters into the main game world from the test environment."

"Well, are there other places where that information is backed up?" Claire asked hopefully, heaving an internal sigh of relief as Robert seemed to accept her story.

Robert tapped his lips with his fingers and leaned back in his chair. "We store user data in a bunch of locations. Obviously, there are the primary servers and the backups. Then there are development servers for work in progress and testing. Hell, even the headsets store some information."

"Really? The headsets?" Claire asked, trying to tamp down on her excitement. "What do you mean?"

Robert scratched his head as he pondered how to answer her question. "Well, the regular headsets don't store much information – which is a function of their limited local memory and hard drive capacity. They might hold a day or two of player and gameplay information – at most. That's what you get with first-gen hardware.

"However, I added some additional storage to the prototypes. It makes them a bit more unwieldy, but I needed to keep better track of user data for purposes of troubleshooting the new equipment. They can hold a couple of weeks of information. I also occasionally back up all of the data to my personal lab."

Robert spared her a quick glance before turning back to his terminal. "Not that this will probably help you much for a regular user. We've only handed out a few of the new prototypes."

"It's still helpful," Claire replied slowly. "At least this answers some of my questions and nothing nefarious is going on." She could feel the knot in her stomach writhe and coil at this last sentence.

Claire's thoughts were racing. She knew that when Robert referred to his lab, he was really talking about his apartment – which was off limits to the cleaning staff and any other employees. It took a great deal of effort, but Claire managed to tamp down on her growing excitement. If Robert was telling the truth, then the data she needed might be on the terminal in his lab.

That thought gave her pause, though. She wasn't sure what she dreaded more, that she might discover that the data she was looking for was missing on Robert's private server or that she might actually have to visit his apartment.

* * *

The monstrous metallic rat towered over the group. The black

vortexes that were its eyes glinted harshly in the pale blue light that illuminated the room. The creature took a lumbering step forward, causing junk to cascade down the length of its back. Its makeshift tail swished back and forth, occasionally scraping against the stone floor and creating a shower of sparks.

"Oh shit," Frank muttered, clutching at his axes and taking a short step backward.

"Stay in position," Jason ordered. "Riley will back you up."

The creature didn't wait for the group to make the first move. It abruptly lashed out with its tail, slashing at Frank. The barbarian managed to raise one of his axes at the last moment, barely blocking the blow with a howling screech of metal grinding against metal. The muscles in Frank's arms bulged, and the power of the monster's attack forced him back several feet, throwing him off balance.

Capitalizing on its advantage, the creature surged forward. Its metallic fangs clamped down on Frank's arm, crimson blood immediately welling from the injury and running down his skin. The barbarian let out a howl of pain, slamming the creature's head over and over with the axe in his free hand in a futile attempt to force the monster off him. Showers of scrap metal fragments sprayed from each impact, but the blows seemed to have little effect on the creature.

Meanwhile, Riley began channeling her *Health Transfer*, a line of blood-red mist forming between her and Frank and casting the already gruesome scene in a macabre light. If nothing else, she could at least keep him alive. As the crimson droplets touched Frank's skin, his flesh began to slowly knit back together – even while the creature's fangs were still embedded in his skin.

Jason commanded his remaining skeletons to enter the fray, hoping to distract the creature for a moment and give Frank a chance to escape. The undead raced forward at a sprint, their rusted weapons screeching against the monster's metallic body. At this new onslaught, the creature thrashed its head, finally releasing Frank and throwing the burly barbarian across the room. His body slammed against a wall, fragments of stone spraying from the impact site. Frank lay unmoving on the floor.

The creature then turned to the skeletons and began making short work of Jason's flimsy, poorly-armed minions. Each monstrous blow reduced an undead soldier to a pile of broken bones and ivory dust. It was clear that his minions wouldn't be able to distract the rat creature for long, which meant that Jason couldn't afford to waste time watching the creature massacre his skeletons.

He turned to Eliza, noting that the mage was watching the scene with wide eyes. He grabbed her shoulder and shook her roughly. "Snap out of it. Inspect the damn thing!" he demanded

urgently.

"It's called the *Packrat*. The creature is level 200 and its… its health is blank?" Eliza reported in confusion.

Then she hesitated, her brow furrowed as she inspected a screen only she could see. "I'm not sure I understand the rest of this. The prompt indicates that it has resistances. However, there is a category for "Critical Weaknesses" that I've never seen before – except it's not much use, it's blank."

"Damn it," Jason muttered, shaking his head. How the hell were they going to kill something without health and some unknown weakness? "Assist Frank and try to keep him up. If he dies, we're screwed," he said to Eliza.

Without waiting to see if the water mage would follow through with his order, Jason glanced over at Riley. He shouted above the crash of metal that filled the room. "Riley, switch to damage. Let's see if we can hurt the damn thing!" He received a curt nod from the Fury in reply, and she promptly nocked an arrow, taking aim at the Packrat.

Meanwhile, Eliza moved quickly, digging in her pack to find a wand. As she grabbed it, her free hand was already moving through the gestures of *Obscuring Mist*. Tendrils of gray vapor began to form in front of her, thickening into a rough sphere as she continued casting the spell. As the mist began to form, Eliza pressed down on the crystal embedded in the hilt of her wand and a spray of blood-red fluid was ejected from the crystal at the top of the instrument. The crimson liquid quickly spread through the ball of moisture before exploding outward in a billowing blanket of mist.

At a gesture from Eliza, the mist turned toward Frank, rolling and tumbling across the room to his prone body before engulfing his form. Jason spared a quick glance at his party menu, which confirmed that Frank's health bar was swiftly refilling.

A roar forced Jason's attention back to the battle raging on the other end of the room. A bolt of dark energy raced from Riley's bow and sped across the room before slamming into the Packrat's head. The force of the explosion promptly blasted apart its jaw and sprayed fragments of debris across the room. The creature stumbled for a moment, caught off balance by the blow.

It seems we can hurt it, Jason thought darkly.

However, before Jason could start celebrating, additional metallic objects began to tumble across the creature's back toward its head before swiftly reforming into a new jaw. Then it leveled its eyes at Riley, the dark miasmas flaring forcefully in what Jason could only assume was anger. The Packrat spun to the side, giving its tail better access to the room.

“Riley, dodge!” Jason screamed in warning.

The Fury must have been thinking the same thing, because she immediately dived into a roll. The monster’s tail swept across the room, the metal whistling as it sped through the air. Its tail promptly smashed into the floor where Riley had been standing only a moment before. The blow left a massive gouge in the stone and threw up a thick cloud of dust.

Frank regained his feet, and he promptly charged out of Eliza’s mist toward the Packrat with his axes raised and a furious roar erupting from his lips. His legs rippled and contorted – his knees inverting with a sickening crunch and thick black fur springing up along his skin. Frank used his enhanced speed to deftly dodge the creature’s attacks, his axes slamming over and over against its jumbled, metallic body.

As Jason looked on, he could see that the barbarian’s attacks were having little effect on the creature. It continued to use the junk that made up its body to repair any damage that Frank managed to inflict. “How the hell are we going to kill this thing?” he murmured to himself, chewing anxiously on his lip.

“I think I might have an idea,” Riley said from beside Jason. She had used Frank’s distraction to make her way to Jason and Eliza near the back of the room. Her armor was torn, and her right arm hung limply against her side. Maybe she hadn’t completely dodged the creature’s attack after all.

“First, drain my health and heal yourself. Eliza needs to focus on Frank,” Jason replied. He spared a glance at Eliza and saw that her brow was furrowed in concentration as she tried to keep her healing mist centered on the fast-moving barbarian. It was all she could do to keep him alive.

Riley nodded, grimacing in pain even as her hands danced through gestures of the *Health Drain* spell. A moment later, Jason could feel the effects of the spell settle over him. It felt like his blood was pressing uncomfortably against his skin – as though it were trying to break out of his body. Yet he pushed the feeling aside and forcefully summoned his dark mana. He couldn’t afford to be distracted right now.

As Riley’s skin began to knit back together and her shoulder popped back into the socket, Jason spoke up again, “Okay, what’s your plan?”

“I fought something similar to this creature in Vaerwald. I bet it’s some sort of golem – held together by mana. If I’m right, there’s probably a mana crystal embedded in its body that’s powering it and allowing it to heal itself.”

Riley’s theory was consistent with the creature’s lack of health

and the “critical weakness” that Eliza had mentioned. Jason grimaced. “But where is the crystal…?” he murmured. His gaze shifted back to the Packrat, Frank’s form dancing around the giant, makeshift monster. Each time Frank tried to flank the creature, it would quickly lash out with its tail. It was almost like it was protecting its body…

Jason’s thoughts raced. Even if he was right and the crystal was in the Packrat’s torso, how the hell were they going to make a hole amid the teeming piles of junk that made up the creature’s body? Riley might be able to use her *Void Arrow*, but then how would they destroy the crystal? Frank needed to keep the creature occupied, and Eliza was focused entirely on healing Frank.

Which just left Jason.

His eyes darted to the drones that lingered behind him, their tiny skeletal bodies skittering anxiously back and forth across the stone floor. These were his last minions. Could he use them somehow? If he could create an explosion, then Riley could take out the crystal. But what did he have that would blast a hole in the damn rat?

Of course, the fire crystals! Jason felt like smacking himself for forgetting the tiny gems that Cecil had given him back in the Twilight Throne.

“Riley,” Jason said to get the Fury’s attention. “I need to alter my drones. Then I’m going to blast a hole in the side of the Packrat’s torso. When I do, you’ll have one shot.”

He gazed at the archer, a grin curling his lips. “Try not to miss.”

“Now that’s just insulting. You know I don’t miss,” Riley replied, placing a hand to her chest in mock offense. “Assuming you don’t drop the ball, I’ll take the damn thing down.”

Jason chuckled, even as his hands began twining through the gestures of *Custom Skeleton* and tendrils of dark mana cascaded down his arms. Time immediately began to lengthen and stretch, Frank and the Packrat’s movements become exaggerated and slow like they were moving through molasses. Yet they were still *moving*, even under the time compression effects of his spell. Which meant he needed to work quickly.

“Let’s just hope my *Bone Crafting* skill is high enough,” he murmured to himself as he dug into his pack. He pulled out the small satchel of fire crystals and his eyes turned to his drones.

With a quick mental command, the miniature skeletons were lifted in the air, forming neat rows in front of Jason. He started with a single drone, placing the fire crystal under its torso and attaching it with small tendrils of dark mana. When the crystal stayed put, he moved on to the next minion, working his way quickly down each row.

He had decided that he needed to place the crystals on each creature's stomach. Cecil's little demonstration in the Twilight Throne had made it clear that the fire crystals would ignite when they were broken. He hoped that the drones could latch onto the Packrat and then clamp down with their spindly legs to crush the crystals.

At least, that was the plan.

Several minutes later, Jason had completed his ministrations and settled his drones back on the floor. His minions now glowed an ominous red and orange, the only sign that an explosive payload was now strapped to their stomachs.

Jason's gaze shifted back to Frank and the Packrat, who were still engaged in their slow-motion dance. A knot twisted in his stomach as he watched the way the monstrous creature crashed through the room and the way its tail whipped through the air. He might have created new explosive minions, but how the hell was he going to get them close enough to do any damage? His drones were rather fragile.

Two ivory discs still spun around Jason – a relic from a previous battle in the Hippie's maze. The shields might offer a delivery system…

Before he could stop himself, Jason cast a frantic glance at Alfred where he stood watching the battle impassively nearby. "That restriction on using the bone shields as stairs doesn't apply to other stuff, right?"

The AI stared back at him for a long moment as the battle raged in front of them. Then he responded languidly, "I haven't placed any other restrictions on the shields. Whether your plan will work is another question entirely. The probability of success is quite low."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Jason muttered.

His gaze shifted back to the battle unfolding in the room. Dark mana was already collecting along Riley's arrow as she readied her attack, tendrils of red energy leeching through the dark miasma and signaling that she was channeling her own health into the missile. There wasn't time to second-guess himself. He was just going to have to gamble. Again.

God, I hope this works.

Closing his eyes, Jason slammed his palm down on the summoning console. The spell abruptly ended, but he was already giving mental commands to both his drones and his bone shields. The discs immediately lowered themselves to the ground, and his minions began piling onto the two shields – which were now acting as makeshift platforms.

There was only one problem with his plan. The range on his bone discs was somewhat limited. He would need to get in close –

really close.

Jason suddenly opened his eyes, his irises glowing with unholy energy. Mana surged through his veins in a frigid river and tattoos of black energy peeled away from his skin and lashed at the air around him as he considered what he was about to do next. Maybe Frank was right. Maybe he really was crazy.

Then Jason darted forward, the bone discs hovering near him. The Packrat immediately saw him coming, and it lashed its tail through the air toward Jason. Frank noticed Jason's headlong charge, his eyes widening in surprise. With a howl and a surge of energy, the barbarian launched himself forward on his wolf-like legs, the blades of his axes barely intercepting the Packrat's tail and throwing off a shower of sparks.

Jason rolled underneath the tail, sending a frantic order to his bone shields to move out of the path of the attack. One shield moved too slowly, and the Packrat's tail glanced against the platform. The blow immediately crushed some of the drones onboard and created a chain explosion. A massive blast of orange flames rocked the room, and the creature's tail was blown apart, shrapnel spraying in every direction.

A piece of scrap metal promptly embedded itself in Jason's shoulder, throwing him off course. He landed on the stone floor with a grunt, his vision swimming and blood streaming down his armor. Notifications appeared in his peripheral vision – likely informing him that his already low health was redlining. Yet he ignored the notices and forced himself back to his feet, continuing toward the creature at a ragged jog.

The Packrat's body towered over him, its malevolent black eyes focused on Jason's haggard, beaten form. With its tail destroyed and already beginning to slowly repair itself, the creature moved to lunge forward and finish Jason with its razor-sharp teeth.

Jason couldn't help but smile as he watched the creature's maw widen and the massive foot-long fangs racing toward him. "Fuck you," he whispered as blood bubbled on his lips.

Then he gave a final mental order.

His remaining disc was already hovering next to the Packrat's torso, and his drones skittered off the platform, taking up positions along the side of its chest. At Jason's order, the tiny undead minions simultaneously clenched their legs, slamming their torsos against the Packrat's metallic, undulating body.

With a roar of sound and a whirlwind of flame, the fire crystals fractured and erupted. Jason was thrown across the room by the blast, his back slamming against a stone wall. He groaned in pain and managed to look up one last time. The explosion had torn a massive

hole in the side of the Packrat's body, the boiling mass of scrap metal already trying to spread to close the wound. Yet Jason could make out a single floating crystal shining brightly with a mixture of sapphire and obsidian energy in the center of the cavity.

Riley chose that moment to release her arrow. A massive ball of energy ripped through the room, sucking in the eerie blue light cast by the torches along the walls like a miniature black hole. The Fury had channeled so much of her own health into her *Void Arrow* that tendrils of energy lanced away from the bolt, ripping and tearing at the ground and walls around it and throwing up fragments of stone and dust.

As Jason's vision began to waver and darken, the ball of energy struck the crystal embedded in the Packrat dead center. Obsidian energy rippled out from the impact in an expanding wave, obliterating the creature's body and disintegrating the piles of metallic junk. As the Packrat was torn apart, it released a final, piercing cry that shook the room and reverberated off the walls.

Jason's health finally reached zero.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

Chapter 22 - Revelatory

"Sir," Caerus said to get Alexion's attention. "The Confessors are ready. Are you prepared to launch the attack?" Alexion recognized that the noble looked uneasy. The muscles around his eyes were tense, and his hand rested on the sword sheathed at his waist.

"Of course, he's ready," Gracien grumbled from nearby. "We've been standing in this gods-forsaken forest for over an hour waiting on your 'preparations.' Just attack the damn town already!"

Caerus ignored the fire guild master's grumbling, turning an inquiring gaze back to Alexion. Say what you want about the game's NPCs, but Alexion had found them to be infinitely more reliable and loyal to his cause than the players. "I believe we're ready," Alexion said quietly. "Begin the attack." At that order, Caerus jogged off to alert the Confessors hidden along the tree line south of the town.

Alexion and Gracien stood on a hilltop overlooking Sibald. A pall of darkness hung over them, evidence that they were standing within the radius of the Twilight Throne's influence. All of their troops were now afflicted with a debuff that lowered their damage, but Alexion suspected it would make little difference. Unarmed townspeople would put up little resistance against his flame-wielding zealots.

"I don't understand the need for all this planning," Gracien grumbled, his eyes on the town below them. "Why don't we just torch the damn thing from a distance and take a few undead corpses?"

Alexion tamped down on his irritation. Gracien was a brute, but he was also useful. "We do not want to alert Jason to our presence, and we do not want anyone to tie the destruction of the village to the remainder of our plans," he explained as patiently as he could. "If we aren't careful, a few witnesses could escape."

Gracien moved to respond, but Alexion gestured at the village. "A moment. The battle is about to commence."

Even as Alexion spoke, he could make out the line of white-robed figures sprinting toward the village. He knew that a similar force was stationed on the roads leading out of town and along the northern tree line. They couldn't afford to let anyone escape or reveal who had participated in the attack.

As the first of the Confessors reached the edge of town, flames erupted along their hands. Fire spewed forth, casting the area in a bright orange glow, and quickly consuming the wood and thatch buildings that made up Sibald. A moment later, shouts erupted from the center of town signaling that the townsfolk were aware of the fires.

The Confessors continued to dart forth, their flames purifying the heathens that lived in this small village. Screams of fear and desperation filled the night air.

Alexion's brow furrowed as he caught sight of bolts of obsidian energy that slammed against the forms of his Confessors. The dark mana ate through their clothing and flesh, their regeneration abilities barely able to keep pace with the malignant energy.

Caerus came racing back up the hill at a sprint. "A contingent of undead from the Twilight Throne appears to be stationed in town. This was not caught during our scouting expeditions. What do you want us to do?"

Alexion suppressed his rage as best he could. He would demand a pound of flesh for this mistake later, but, for now, he needed to act quickly. Several of his Confessors were already on the ground, their bodies broken and bloodied. They might eventually overwhelm Jason's troops, but the casualties would be unacceptable.

"Order the nephilim to reinforce the Confessors," Alexion commanded. "The plan is the same. We burn the town to the ground, and we leave no survivors."

"Yes, sir," Caerus nodded, then began shouting to the men and women hidden in the trees. Immediately the nephilim, spears held at the ready, dropped to the ground with a gust of wind and a spray of dust before racing toward the village.

"Finally, a little fighting," Gracien barked with a laugh. He stretched the muscles of his back and shoulders while channeling his fire mana. His eyes glowed a brilliant crimson and flames curled around his staff. "I may as well have some fun," he murmured.

"Just leave enough bodies intact for the next stage of our plan," Alexion cautioned, watching the fire mage nervously as flames began to whip and spin around his body.

A manic grin curled Gracien's lips. "I know the goal… but we don't need all of them."

With that statement, a barrage of flames erupted from the fire mage's staff and raced into the air above the town. An enormous molten ball of energy swiftly began to form, illuminating the town and the battle that raged along the streets. As it reached the size of a house, the ball of mana suddenly expanded, and a rain of fire cascaded down upon the town.

As the screams of the townsfolk and undead rang through the air, Alexion noticed the gleam in Gracien's eyes. Perhaps he had underestimated the mage. He could be incredibly useful.

* * *

Motes of blue energy rained down around Jason like ethereal snowflakes. With a groan, he realized he was standing inside the game's deathscape. The recent battle was playing out again in front of him, but this time the crash of metal sounded muted and surreal.

Jason looked on impassively as he watched himself walk through the same familiar steps of the fight. Frank's burly form was hurled into a wall. Riley barely dodged the Packrat's tail whip. Eliza's healing mist drifted through the room. Then Jason began his fateful sprint toward the creature, his bone shields loaded with glowing, crimson Drones. Even now, as he watched the battle unfold calmly, he wasn't certain how he could have improved on his harebrained plan.

Or what the hell I'm going to do next, he thought with a grimace.

He was now completely out of minions, and he hadn't exactly designed his class to fare well in combat. Sure, he had let Riley drain his health before his last mad dash toward the Packrat, but that last battle had still driven home that he was only able to survive for a grand total of ten seconds in a straight fight. Maybe fifteen seconds with full health…

How were they going to handle the next boss? Or the next group of creatures? Of course, those questions assumed he could even get back through the Hippie's irritating maze of rooms and regroup with his teammates.

At that thought, Jason felt a hollow weight settle in his stomach. He abruptly stood and began pacing the room, the occasional crash and scrape of metal from the battle causing him to flinch. All of the events over the last few days felt like they were pressing down on him. The sensation was smothering – like he was drowning in the weight of his own problems.

As though on cue, the game world suddenly began to stutter and jerk erratically. "Oh, fucking fantastic…" Jason muttered as the room disappeared and another vision claimed him.

He was suddenly standing in the courtyard outside of the temple. The clan of lizardmen was nowhere to be seen, and the temple's stones were in much better repair – previously crumbling blocks now solid and detailed scrollwork tracing their surface. Bright sunlight shone down on the roughhewn rock that riddled the ground.

Jason's body limped forward of its own volition, controlled by another person. As he trailed behind Noah, his hand clutched at his stomach where the former dull ache had now blossomed into a piercing pain. He forced himself to keep shuffling along with awkward, pain-filled steps. He knew he didn't have much time left. He just hoped it would be long enough to fulfill his duty.

As though reading his mind, Noah chose that moment to turn back to him. "Finally! We are nearly there, Father. We just…" His son trailed

off as he took in what Jason could only assume was his haggard appearance.

Jason tried his best to stand up straighter, and he snatched his hand from beneath his cloak. He wasn't quick enough.

"Are you okay?" Noah asked in concern. "What's wrong?"

Before Jason could stop him, Noah had stepped back to him and thrown aside his cloak, revealing the gash in his side. Black blood still trickled from the wound, staining his shirt and pants. "Oh, gods," Noah muttered, his expression warring between terror and anger. "Why didn't you tell me you were injured?"

"Would that have changed our course at this point?" Jason asked, his voice sounding aged and dry to his own ears. "We don't have much time left, and we need to keep moving."

"At least let me help you," his son replied, visibly swallowing his anger and fear before draping Jason's arm over his shoulder. Jason leaned gratefully against Noah, putting some of his weight on his son.

With Noah's help, the pair made better progress and managed to make it to the temple's entrance in just a few minutes. In contrast to the wreckage that Jason had witnessed before, debris no longer obscured the temple's entrance, and stairs descended down into the gloom.

"There they are!" a voice cried from behind them.

The pair whirled, and Jason lost his balance for a moment, stumbling and leaning heavily against the stone wall as his son drew his sword and readied himself for an attack. Nearly a dozen humans robed in polished leather armor suddenly teleported into the courtyard, moving in erratic patterns and creating small flashes of light as they used some sort of short-ranged teleport. They would be upon Jason and Noah within minutes.

"Skywardens," Noah muttered. "The humans must have sent them as advance scouts."

Jason managed a nod. "I will handle this," he said to his son. "Prepare to cave in the entrance. That will buy us some time and force them to circle the island to enter through the grotto."

"Are you sure…?" his son began.

"Move. Now," Jason said more forcefully.

His son's expression was still conflicted, but he gave a curt nod and sheathed his blade before reaching into his pack and pulling out a metal stylus. He began drawing a complicated pattern of runes along the side of the stairwell, the images glowing an angry red where the instrument touched the stone wall.

Jason stepped forward so that his son was behind him in the stairwell. Then he began to channel his dark mana. The sensation that swept over Jason was unlike anything he had experienced before. When the Keeper called to the Dark One, the god responded with a flood of power. Mana raced through his veins in a tidal wave of energy. Jason felt

rejuvenated, the pain in his stomach retreating. A globe of obsidian mana appeared around him, solid tendrils branching off from the sphere and lashing at the approaching humans hungrily.

"Miasma," Jason murmured. Even his whisper echoed with power.

The globe suddenly expanded, a wall of dark energy sweeping through the courtyard. The Skywardens' eyes widened in surprise as they caught sight of the wave of destruction approaching. The lead human was too slow to teleport away, the dark energy enveloping him before he could react. His flesh began to boil and slough off his body in waves, his face twisting in anguish but no sound managing to escape his lips.

The other scouts tried desperately to dodge or teleport up to the wall ringing the courtyard. The swell of dark energy, however, was like a living thing, and it followed them, tentacles of darkness emerging from the crest of the wave. A tendril wrapped around one man's foot, pulling the screaming human into the depths of the tidal wave. Yet several of the scouts still managed to make it to the wall, the group now in full retreat.

"Father, the runes are ready," Noah reported.

Jason whirled to face Noah, and his son flinched back under his gaze. An aura of dark mana still enveloped him and made it dangerous to approach. With a concerted effort of will, Jason forcefully released his mana. The pain returned immediately, and he staggered, Noah barely catching him before he fell.

Jason's vision was beginning to blur, and he could feel himself losing consciousness, a terrible weakness settling in his bones. Casting Miasma had taken too much out of him in his current state. However, it had been necessary.

As Noah led him deeper into the temple, Jason could hear a roar of noise cascade back down the staircase, and he could feel an immense heat on his back. The way the ground trembled and the crash of stone confirmed that his son had managed to seal the entrance.

"Don't worry, father. We'll make it. I know we will. You just need to stay with me," Noah said in a reassuring voice, but his eyes were filled with a desperate terror as he watched his father.

The vision ended just as quickly as it had begun, and Jason abruptly found himself back in his own body – or at least his digital body. However, he was no longer standing in the room where his group had faced off against the Packrat. The sudden change in scenery and perspective was disorienting, and it took Jason a moment to realize that he was once again standing inside the grotto, waves lapping against the ruined dock behind him.

"Perhaps that vision took longer than I thought," he said to himself, his voice echoing faintly off the stone walls of the cave. That was the only explanation he could think of to account for his sudden resurrection and the abrupt change in location.

Jason rubbed at his eyes tiredly before deciding to start the trek back to the first floor of the temple. Hopefully, the Hippie would take pity on him and let him back through the maze. As Jason reached the top of the stairs, he discovered that doors now stood on each wall of the first room, the portals wide open.

He opened his map nervously, saying a silent prayer to the Dark One at the same time. Jason heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that the map of the first floor of the temple had been filled in. Perhaps his group had deactivated this portion of the temple's defenses by slaying the Packrat. Jason certainly wasn't going to question it. He could use all the help he could get. His group was still racing against the clock, and the lives of the captured sailor zombies still hung in the balance.

As he walked back through the maze, Jason's thoughts wandered back to the scene he had witnessed with the Keeper and his son. This vision had been longer than the others, and the sensations had been much more vivid. At times, Jason had felt confused regarding whether it was him acting or the ancient Keeper. He could still feel a dull ache in his abdomen, and his fingers rubbed at the spot to reassure himself that he wasn't bleeding out.

Why was he having these visions? What did they mean? What was he supposed to do with this information? Why were the Keeper and his son being chased by humans? Jason spared a glance at Alfred, who padded along quietly beside him. He knew that these visions were a product of the AI's intervention, but what was his goal? What was he trying to tell Jason?

Not that Alfred is likely to tell me, he thought bitterly. He was beginning to regret his deal with the AI.

Jason forced himself to calm down and approach this logically. He needed to start with what he did know. It was pretty clear at this point that the visions were showing him real events that had taken place within the game world. The Tentacle Horror and the caved-in entrance to the temple seemed to confirm that much. That meant that the Keeper had once visited this temple – presumably in order to protect the grimoire.

As Jason carefully skirted around a corpse in one of the empty rooms of the maze, another thought occurred to him. Perhaps these corpses had once been the humans chasing Noah and his father. If Noah had caved in the entrance to the temple, the humans would have needed to circle back to the grotto and enter the temple through the lower levels. The explosion might also explain the hole that now rested in the center of the courtyard that the lizardmen were using to make sacrifices to their "god."

That still didn't address the question of why the humans had

been chasing the Keeper and his son in the first place. Jason recalled them mentioning something about a purge. Perhaps the undead had once been hunted? That might explain why there hadn't been any undead inside of the game world before Jason conquered Lux.

Shaking his head, Jason muttered, "It feels like this is building to something…"

"Perhaps," Alfred replied calmly. Jason felt like he could detect a note of amusement in the AI's voice.

Stupid half-sentient computer. All he received was a soft snort in response.

Jason's thoughts were interrupted as they made it back to the Packrat's lair. "Finally!" Frank exclaimed. "We have been waiting around here for a *long* time." As Jason approached, Frank punched him in the arm. Hard.

"Geez. What was that for?" Jason asked, rubbing his aching shoulder.

"For that dumbass 'plan' – that's what," Frank retorted. "You really outdid yourself this time."

Riley chuckled softly. "I know right. And he was lecturing *me* about not missing my shot. Then he goes and gets smashed against a wall."

"It worked, didn't it?" Jason said in a grudging tone, gesturing at the pile of scrap that now rested against the far side of the room.

"I'll say it did!" the Hippie added, his head popping up out of the mountain of debris. "Plus, look at all this cool stuff. Do you remember when we got this thing, Fluffy?" The god pulled himself out of the pile, causing small cascades of junk to tumble down the mountain. In one hand, he held a rusted candelabra. The black sheep showed up a moment later, trotting out from behind the pile and giving the capricious god an exasperated snort.

"You mean a rusted pile of garbage?" Eliza replied, sarcasm lacing her voice.

The Hippie gave her an offended look. "Garbage? These are our treasures. Or was it tribute? It's hard to remember things clearly at my age."

The god's rambling was interrupted by a squeaking sound coming from the pile of junk behind him. A moment later, a small skeletal rat burrowed out of the mountain and skittered over to Fluffy – scaling the sheep's side and standing on his back. Fluffy seemed completely unperturbed by this sudden turn of events.

"Oh, hello there, Felix," the Hippie said, bowing his head cordially. "You're looking great. Have you lost weight?"

This question earned the god a tirade of squeaks as Felix waved his bony forelegs at the Hippie in irritation.

"I didn't abandon you here," the god retorted. "I was on vacation. I think I earned some time off after all those people started breaking in and destroying my things."

This was answered by another round of squeaking while Jason and his teammates eyed each other skeptically. Was the god really talking to a dead rat? Or, more troubling, were they looking at the first-floor guardian that they had just defeated?

The Hippie looked a little contrite. "Okay, fine. Yes, I should have probably invited you to come along, but *someone* had to stay and look after things."

"If I could interrupt," Frank interjected cautiously, "why are you talking to a dead rat? Also, and this is going to seem like a weird question, is Felix the one who just attacked us?"

"This is Felix, the first-floor guardian," the Hippie explained, gesturing at the small rat who still stood on Fluffy's back. "As to your other question…" the god trailed off, looking a little embarrassed. "I might have left Felix here a while back, and he might have needed to blow off a little steam – if you know what I mean."

"Suuure," Frank replied slowly, eyeing the dead rat nervously. Felix gave him a nod as if to say, "What's up?"

"Alright, let's try a different tactic," Jason said, getting the Hippie's attention. "How is Felix still alive? For that matter, why have we been fighting undead? I thought this was supposed to be your temple and that you were the water deity in this world."

Felix squeaked loudly and gestured back and forth between the god and Jason. "Fine, I'll tell them," the Hippie said to the undead rat before turning back to Jason. "The answer is that I might have had a guest before I locked down the temple. One of you dark mana sorts, actually. There's a makeshift dark mana well upstairs that's been helping to power the defenses."

Oh, that's just perfect, Jason thought sourly. Although, at least a few puzzle pieces were beginning to click together after his latest vision. The Keeper must have done something after entering the temple.

"But that's neither here nor there," the Hippie continued. "Since you all have solved my maze and defeated the first-floor guardian in glorious combat, you have earned the right to continue on your quest!" This little speech earned the god another angry squeak from Felix – which he promptly ignored.

"And what should we expect from the second level?" Eliza asked sourly. "Animated silverware?"

Jason snorted in amusement before he could stop himself, sparing a glance at the water mage who now stood glaring at the Hippie. He was glad to see her opening up a bit.

“Oh, that’s a fantastic idea! Fluffy, take some notes,” the Hippie directed, the sheep ignoring him completely. “We could set up a long table loaded with food. And then when the intruders – I mean guests – sit down to eat… blam! A full-on food fight of epic proportions.”

“Sounds wonderful. And so the answer to my question is…” Eliza said, tapping her foot impatiently.

“I can’t just divulge all of my secrets!” the god responded, throwing up his hands. “That would ruin the fun. Suffice it to say that the next level is going to be much more entertaining than the last. “Which reminds me, I need to go make a few preparations.” With that, the god snapped his fingers and abruptly disappeared along with Fluffy and Felix.

The group stood staring at the spot the Hippie had occupied only a moment before. “I’ve said this before, but I still hate that guy,” Frank muttered. This earned him nods from the rest of the group.

“Putting that unhelpful explanation aside,” Jason began, “Did we at least get any loot from that last battle.”

“Oh yeah,” Frank replied. “We found this.” His friend flipped a metallic object at Jason, and he caught it in his palm. It was a small ring, glowing runes inscribed upon its surface. A quick inspection revealed the following:

Gathering Ring
Crafted from what appears to be simple steel. Its surface inscribed with glowing, arcane runes. Just holding this ring gives you the urge to go out and start collecting things! Now, we’re not saying that wearing this ring will turn you into a hoarder, but just look around you. I mean, c’mon…
Quality: A
Durability: Indestructible
+3 Effective levels to all gathering skills
+10 Endurance
+10 Vitality
(Soulbound)

Jason couldn’t help but laugh at the description. “A hoarding ring? Why am I not surprised?”

“Probably because it feels like we are pawns in this god’s game,” Frank answered dryly.

With a shake of his head, Jason tossed the ring to Eliza. “Here. This is yours.”

The water mage only barely managed to catch the ring before giving Jason a confused look. “Are you sure…?”

“Yeah, take it,” Frank interjected. “The rest of us won’t get much use out of it, and your mist and potions helped get us through that fight.”

Eliza stared at the ring in her palm for a moment, a conflicted expression flitting across her face before she slowly slid it onto her finger. “Thank you,” she murmured quietly.

“No need to thank us,” Riley said. “We’re a team. Plus, we’re going to have to keep working together if we’re going to make it through this damn dungeon before the lizardmen kill all the undead sailors.”

“Speaking of which, I just need a second to check my notifications. Then we should get moving,” Jason said, glancing at the windows in his peripheral vision. “I have a bad feeling about this next level, and we’ve lost some time.”

“And who was responsible for that?” Frank demanded with a chuckle.

Jason ignored his friend’s teasing and pulled up his notifications. A barrage of windows suddenly appeared in the air before him, followed by his Character Status screen.

x3 Level Up!
You have (15) undistributed stat points.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Mana Mastery
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 3
Effect 1: -6.5% to mana cost.
Effect 2: +1.5% faster casting rate.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Custom Skeleton
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 7
Effect 1: You may raise a custom skeleton using nearby bones. The skeleton’s level is calculated as the caster’s level + Willpower/66.
Effect 2: Mana cost reduced by 7.5%.

x1 Skill Rank Up: Sprint
Skill Level: Beginner Level 2
Effect: 6% increased movement speed.
Cost: 5 Stamina / Second

Character Status			
Name:	Jason	**Gender:**	Male
Level:	153	**Class:**	Necromancer
Race:	Human	**Alignment:**	Chaotic-Evil
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	6200
Health:	1020	**H-Regen:**	1.10/Sec
Mana:	9250	**M-Regen:**	47.95/Sec
Stamina	1020	**S-Regen:**	2.60/Sec
Str:	12	**Dex:**	26
Vit:	26	**End:**	26
Int:	50	**Will:**	829

Affinities			
Dark:	45%	**Light:**	7%
Fire:	3%	**Water:**	4%
Air:	4%	**Earth:**	6%

With a flick of his wrist, Jason swiped away the notifications.

Clearly, that battle had been rather difficult. Even the game acknowledged that a partially-immortal loot golem shaped like a rat was worth three levels. Jason spared a glance at his teammates where they milled around near the stairwell leading up to the next level of the temple. Hopefully, they had also leveled quite a bit. Without his minions, Jason was going to be relying on them heavily in the next few encounters.

“Alright, I’m ready,” Jason called out as he approached his teammates. “Let’s go see what our irritating host has in store for us next.”

Chapter 23 - Playful

Alexion rode at the head of a column of troops, sunlight shining down on the dusty roadway. They had long since passed outside of the Twilight Throne's radius of influence, heading southwest. A line of troops and prisoners stretched behind them as Alexion's nephilim drifted through the air above the road, their winged shadows occasionally flickering across the ground.

"Your lackey has returned," Gracien observed with a grim chuckle from where he rode beside Alexion. The burly mage seemed unperturbed by the recent battle in Sibald. In fact, he seemed in much better humor after the conflict – likely thriving on the death and destruction.

As he turned, Alexion could indeed see that Caerus was approaching. In contrast to Gracien, the noble looked haggard, and dark circles hung under his eyes. His mail was torn at the shoulder, and blood stained his scabbard – evidence that he had participated in the fighting on the front lines.

"How did we do?" Alexion demanded as the noble approached.

Caerus nodded curtly before pulling a stack of parchment from his saddlebags. As he ran through the figures listed on the page, he began his report, "Sibald was entirely destroyed. As instructed, we burned the buildings to the ground and did not leave any trace of our presence.

"After the engagement, we determined that an entire division of Jason's forces were stationed in the village. However, it is not clear why those troops were there." Caerus spared a glance at Gracien. "Our intelligence had reported that Sibald was home to slavers – not Twilight Throne troops and deserters." This earned him a smirk from Gracien.

Caerus coughed to clear his throat before continuing, "In terms of casualties, we lost nearly a dozen Confessors and twice as many nephilim in the attack. However, we managed to capture approximately fifty undead prisoners. The total casualties, including villagers, was nearly two hundred."

Alexion grimaced at the report. They had suffered decent losses in the exchange – despite the surprise attack and Gracien's intervention. Between the area-wide debuff near the Twilight Throne and the relatively high levels of Jason's troops, the encounter hadn't been quite the one-sided massacre Alexion had been expecting. However, they had still come out ahead and accomplished their goal.

"Those are manageable losses," Alexion finally replied.

"Do you have sufficient men to handle the next stage of your plan?" Gracien asked, his eyes glinting red in the sunlight as he turned to inspect

the troops behind them. They all looked nearly as tired and bloody as Caerus. A long line of undead marched behind them, their forms slumped and broken, and the chains bound to their feet rattling as they trudged forward.

The hollow void in the back of Alexion's mind throbbed and pulsed angrily at Gracien's comment. How dare he insinuate weakness on the part of the Crystal Reach the whisper demanded? Especially after they had only won this latest conflict on the backs of his soldiers. Alexion did his best to tamp down on the voice. They would need the mage for this next part.

Before Alexion could respond, Caerus addressed Gracien's insulting question. "We will have travelers reinforcing our troops when we reach Vaerwald. As long as you are able to uphold your part of the bargain, we shouldn't encounter any issues," Caerus retorted, the noble's voice carrying a trace of bitterness.

"Are you challenging my competence?" Gracien demanded in a low voice.

Caerus met his gaze evenly. "I am simply stating a fact. You have provided little assistance in our engagements to-date, despite the benefits you stand to reap from this plan. Your Firestorm back in Sibald also injured as many of our own troops as the undead, so you'll excuse me if I am skeptical of your abilities."

Gracien reached for his staff, letting out an angry growl. "I should teach you to respect those more powerful than you, noble-born. Or perhaps I should demonstrate the difference in our 'abilities' firsthand."

"I would welcome the opportunity to school you in the ways of combat," Caerus replied, unperturbed by the mage's threat.

"Stop it," Alexion snapped, irritated by their bickering. "We have enough to accomplish without such petty infighting. Keep your personal issues at bay and focus on the task at hand. There is more at stake here than your own pride."

The two men lapsed into an angry silence, still glaring at each other. However, they had at least ceased their squabbling. Alexion could feel the hollow void hum softly in the back of his mind as he contemplated what they were about to do next. Their actions would change not only the fate of his own city and complete the first step toward completing the Lady's quest, but he expected it would also send ripples through the game world.

* * *

The group made their way up the staircase leading to the next level of the temple, their footsteps echoing in the gloomy, stone stairwell. Jason's thoughts were distracted, and he lingered toward the

back of the group. He would be next to useless right now without any minions. He supposed he could have asked the group to go back through the maze and recover a handful of ragtag skeletons, but they needed to keep moving. The clock was still ticking.

He was just going to have to rely on his teammates for now.

"What is this?" Frank muttered from the front of the group. He stood near the top of the staircase and was stooped over looking at something resting against the stairs.

As Jason approached, he could see that Frank had discovered another skeleton. Yet its clothing was in much better repair than the corpses the group had witnessed in the Hippie's maze. The dead man's tunic was a dark green, the colors faded with time, but still bearing a striking resemblance to the attire worn by members of House Baen. A sword and several packs lay around the man, their contents strewn about the staircase.

"Do you think this could be Lord Baen's son?" Eliza asked in a concerned voice, adjusting her glasses.

"I don't know. He looks like he's been dead for a long time…" Jason trailed off, dropping to a knee and inspecting the corpse more closely – rifling through the dead man's pockets for some evidence of his identity. His *Perception* skill highlighted what appeared to be a fractured bone along the man's thigh and a large tear in his leather greaves.

Perhaps the cause of death? he wondered.

Then he caught sight of something crumpled in the skeleton's right hand. Jason gingerly pulled back the skeleton's fingers, the bone brittle and stiff. With a crack, a finger snapped away, allowing Jason to retrieve the object the man had been holding when he died. It was a piece of paper, the surface yellowed with age and covered in dust. As Jason unfolded the paper, what appeared to be a signet ring fell out, and the metal rattled against the floor of the staircase.

Jason carefully swiped away the grime covering the letter, trying his best not to damage the paper itself. After several seconds, he could make out text scrawled on the paper. It appeared the dead man had left behind a note. His teammates crowded around as they read through the contents of the ancient letter.

To Whoever Finds This Letter,

You surely will not know me. I doubt my family will send anyone to recover my body or provide rescue. I will die here, alone and forgotten. I have known that for some time. And so,

these are my final words, likely addressed to a stranger – if they are read by anyone at all.

I failed in the quest that my father forced upon me, despite my protests. This island was rumored to be cursed long before we set foot here, and our crews fervently avoided its shores. I told my father that this mad quest was a risk to our family, but he would not listen. He was obsessed with this relic and convinced that it would bring our family more wealth and power.

Yet the search for this relic has only brought death. Half of our crew perished to the monster that guards the island before we had even cleared the mists. Upon making landfall, we were then set upon by a group of monstrous lizards, and our crew was taken captive at the hands of these savages. Even at death's door, I am embarrassed to admit that if I had not been attending the call of nature, I would surely have perished as well.

And now I am the last member of our crew, and I am about to join those good men in the afterlife. I have only made it this far on guile alone, but the creature that guards the first floor has finally brought my journey to an end.

If anyone finds this letter, please return it to my father, Lord Baen of Falcon's Hook. I wish him to know what became of his son and his crew. I hope that my father will read my last words – the words I was too weak to say in life. Yet death gives a man courage…

You are a hateful man, and I hope you burn for your greed.

Thomas Baen, House Baen

"Wow," Riley murmured. "So, I guess that the old man was full of crap."

"It certainly looks that way," Jason agreed.

Frank shook his head as he looked back at the corpse. "But this guy, Thomas, looks like he's been dead for years. I don't understand.

Didn't Lord Baen claim that his son had only made this journey recently?"

"That's what he said…" Eliza replied quietly, a troubled expression painted on her face.

Jason rubbed his chin for a moment, lost in thought as he tried to piece together what Lord Baen had told them and the events he had witnessed in his visions. The Keeper and his son had clearly managed to activate the temple defenses, but, according to Lord Baen, the mists and the tentacle creature were new problems. What if he had been telling the truth about that part?

"Perhaps, the mists and the tentacle creature weren't attacking ships until Thomas came here." Jason said slowly. "What if Thomas somehow reactivated the temple's defenses?"

This would make sense given Jason's visions. The Keeper and his son had likely managed to activate the temple defenses a long time ago. Maybe those defenses had faded over the years, which would mean that Thomas' presence had awoken that ancient power once again. That explanation began to hang together, but Jason wasn't quite ready to admit to his friends that he had possibly been hallucinating the memories of an ancient NPC.

"That sort of follows," Frank replied, his brow furrowed in thought. "It would explain why Lord Baen seemed so dead set on finding this relic and why he didn't seem that worried about his son. He already knew his son was dead and he was focused on retrieving the relic since that would be the only way to remove the mists and subdue the tentacle creature."

The group lapsed into a troubled silence as they contemplated Frank's words.

"It might also explain the lizardmen," Eliza offered tentatively.

"How so?" Frank asked in confusion.

"Well, they seemed desperate to make more sacrifices to the tentacle creature. Maybe that is their way of placating it. Yet there were hundreds of lizardmen. How could their population have grown so large if they kept sacrificing members of their own tribe? They must have been sacrificing humans…"

"Damn, that makes sense," Frank said, shaking his head. Jason couldn't help but agree. That would explain the human skulls they had seen outside the lizardman encampment.

"If you all are right, then Lord Baen's plan was crazy," Riley said, her dark mana flaring angrily. "First, he sent his son to his death and then he kept sending his own crews after the same relic knowing that no one was coming back? If that's the case, then Lord Baen was responsible for the loss of his family's wealth. He destroyed his own trading fleet."

"It's even worse than that, though," Eliza said quietly. "That also means that Lord Baen knew he was sending us into a death trap. He set us up."

Jason could feel his anger rising. "Well, if that's the case, we will need to have some words with Lord Baen when we get back," he said grimly.

"I would be happy to help you *explain* the situation to him," Riley added, her hand clenching around the hilt of one of her daggers. As she finished speaking, another quest update appeared in Jason's vision.

Quest Update: Strength of Many

Your party has made it past the first floor of the temple and has discovered the remains of Lord Baen's son. You have also begun to realize that Lord Baen may have lied to you regarding Anguine Isle and the dangers the island poses. What you decide to do with that information is up to you.

P.S. – We suggest a violent and painful death for Lord Baen. Just our two cents…

Difficulty: A
Success: Gather the following three ingredients:

1. Heart of a dungeon boss. □
2. The Dark One's Grimoire.
3. Two willing sacrifices.

Secondary Success: Recover the relic that is creating the mists surrounding Anguine Isle and return it to Lord Baen.
Failure: Unknown
Reward: Advancement in the Path of the Dark

Jason forced himself to swallow his anger. He wanted to stab the selfish old noble, but they couldn't do anything about Lord Baen right now. Hell, they might not even make it off this island at the rate they were going. They only had so long until the lizardmen sacrificed the sailors – assuming the creatures had even kept their end of the bargain. He intended to betray them after all…

"Let's keep moving," Jason said, carefully stowing Thomas' letter in his pack. "We will deal with Lord Baen later. Right now, we need to complete the second level of the temple."

His teammates nodded in agreement, angry expressions still lingering on their faces. Frank took point, making his way further up the stairway. As he crested the top of the stairs, he froze in place, his mouth opening slightly in surprise.

Riley nearly ran into him, and she swatted his shoulder. “Give a girl some warning.”

A moment later, Jason could understand why Frank had stopped so suddenly. The staircase opened into a massive chamber. Actually, *chamber* might not have been accurate. They were standing in what appeared to be a medieval amphitheater. A stage rested along the northern part of the room while the southern section was dominated by a set of stands. Stretching up several stories into the air, stone benches extended the width of the room in a semi-circle.

The staircase leading up from the first floor exited onto the side of the stage, which left the group staring up at the stands. Another wide staircase stretched up through the rows of seats, and dead-ended into a set of broad double doors at the back of the theater. Jason could only assume that this must be the way to the next level of the temple.

“What the hell is this?” Frank said, his voice carrying in the large room.

“I have no idea,” Jason murmured in reply. “Leave it to the Hippie to build an amphitheater in his temple.”

“I guess we can make our way up that second set of stairs,” Riley said, pointing to the staircase leading up through the stands.

“Ahh, you finally made it!” the Hippie exclaimed, clapping his hands. He had suddenly appeared in the first row, a bowl of what appeared to be popcorn settled in his lap. Fluffy and Felix were sitting beside him, the sheep looking especially uncomfortable at being forced into a sitting position.

“What is this place?” Frank demanded, frustration tinging his voice.

“It’s Fluffy’s theater, of course,” the Hippie replied in confusion. “It gets rather dull around here, and so we decided to build something to keep us occupied.” He placed a hand to the side of his mouth and continued in a stage whisper, “Fluffy wanted to be a playwright in his youth.”

Jason massaged his temple with one hand to ward off the headache he felt coming on. “Okay, it’s a theater, but can’t we just walk up those stairs to the next level.”

“Tsk, tsk,” the Hippie replied. “That would ruin all of the fun. We haven’t even assigned your parts yet or begun the first act of the play.”

“And if we simply refuse to take part in this play?” Riley demanded, crossing her arms.

"Well, then I suppose you won't be making it to the next level," the Hippie replied with a shrug and a snap of his fingers. As the sound echoed through the chamber, the rattle of bones suddenly filled the room. A legion of undead began to knit themselves together among the stands. Several hundred undead men and women suddenly stood in neat rows as their dull, void-like eyes turned to face the stage in unison.

"Oh, shit," Jason murmured. They were now completely outnumbered.

"Besides, look at everyone that showed up to see the show!" the Hippie said, waving a hand at their new audience. "Can you imagine the riot if we had to refund their tickets? They have been waiting for *ages* to see the show!"

"Fine, fine," Jason replied in an irritated voice. "What do we need to do?"

"Ahh, now that's the spirit! Now, which script should we use?" A pile of papers suddenly appeared in the Hippie's hand, and he shuffled through the stack anxiously. "Ahh, this one would be perfect!" he exclaimed a moment later, brandishing a script in the air. "This is a Fluffy original, so you're sure to love it."

"This is going to be bad," Eliza said, glancing at the group with a worried expression.

"Let's just hope it isn't a musical," Frank murmured.

Ignoring Frank and Eliza, the Hippie continued, "This play is entitled *Mary had a Little Lamb*. Now, I know what you're thinking – this is going to be derivative drivel, and there may be some infringement issues. However, I assure you that Fluffy has put his own twist on this classic tale of a little girl's love for her sheep."

"That's not really a *tale* so much as a nursery rhyme," Frank muttered. "Is this guy nuts?"

"After going through weeks of this, I'm pretty sure the answer is a hard yes," Eliza answered dryly.

"Now, now. Please respect the director," the Hippie said, placing a hand to his chest. "I will help bring Fluffy's creative vision to the big screen! Or stage, I suppose. Anyway, let's get this show on the road!"

With that, the Hippie snapped his fingers once more. The world began to stutter and jerk around the group, Jason's teammates looking around in confusion as the amphitheater faded from view. Then, with a sudden flash of light, the group abruptly found themselves standing in a field of brilliant emerald grass that swayed gently in the breeze. Bright sunlight shone down from a cloudless sky. The edge of a forest loomed to the west, the tree line just visible in the distance.

"What is this?" Frank asked, whirling around to take in their

new surroundings. The rest of the group looked equally confused at the unexpected change in scenery.

Jason glanced at Alfred where he stood impassively nearby. Jason had experienced these types of visions before, although perhaps nothing this vivid. He raised his hand, realizing that he still had full control of his body. Maybe this wasn't a vision. Had the AI given the water god the ability to create miniature pocket universes? If so, that didn't bode well for this next challenge.

"*Mary had a little lamb, it's fleece as black as night*," the Hippie's voice suddenly boomed from the sky, the god nowhere to be seen.

As the Hippie spoke these words, Eliza's appearance suddenly changed, her outfit warping into a colorful sundress and her wand lengthening to form a shepherd's staff. At the same time, a small flock of a dozen sheep appeared nearby, their fleece a traditional white and gray. Fluffy's obsidian form stood in the center of the group, the god's pet looking around himself with an exasperated expression as though uncertain why he had suddenly been injected into the story.

"*And everywhere that Mary went, her black lamb was sure to cause a fight. So Mary hired…* umm… *she hired mercenaries, so that her sheep could avoid a fright!* Yeah, that totally rhymes…"

As the Hippie finished the next tortured verse, Jason's clothing began to change. His leather armor and daggers abruptly disappeared and were replaced with a thick chainmail tunic and greaves. A longsword now swung from his waist and he could feel the weight of a shield strapped to his back. A frantic glance at Frank and Riley confirmed that their armor and weapons were also undergoing similar changes.

The Hippie coughed to clear his throat before continuing. "*Now, Mary had a quest, it was an interesting test. She had agreed to deliver her flock, to a neighboring man wearing a white frock. The man had also been quite clear, Mary must protect the sheep she holds so dear. For if any sheep were to die, then she wouldn't be given another try*.

"*And so begins the tale, of a striking maid and the quest she must not fail!*"

A quest notification crashed into Jason's field of view. By the confused expressions on his teammates' faces, he could only assume they were looking at the same prompt.

New Quest: Mary Had a Little Quest

Your party has been conscripted to take part in a play that was presumably written by a sheep, and that is now being directed by a possibly insane god. In case you didn't understand the god's poor

rhyming, your job is to deliver the herd of sheep to a contact in the nearby town of Griswald without allowing any of the sheep to die. Defend those cuddly bastards with your life.

P.S. – Your classes have also been changed for the duration of the play… ahem, quest – I meant "quest."

Difficulty: B
Success: Deliver the herd safely to the contact in Griswald.
Failure: Allow any of the sheep to die.
Reward: Completion of the temple's second floor.

"Are you kidding me? I'm a *mercenary* now?" Frank said, his hands darting through the air as he reviewed his notifications and Character Status screen.

With a growing sense of dread, Jason pulled up his own system messages.

System Notice

Your class has been temporarily changed from Necromancer to Mercenary. Your stats have been reallocated to *Strength*, *Dexterity*, and *Vitality,* and your spellcasting skills and spells have been temporarily removed.

New Passive Skill: Block
You have learned how to block attacks with a metal disc. Good for you!
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: 10% increased speed and reflexes when blocking attacks.
Effect 2: 1% chance to stun your opponent for 1 second on block.

New Active Skill: Shield Bash
Nothing hurts more than a blow to the head with your precious metal disc. Well, actually a lot of things probably hurt more, but I'm sure your opponent will be surprised at least.
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: 150% increased weapon damage when striking with

your shield.
Effect 2: 50% chance to stun your opponent for 1 second on attack.
Cost: 50 Stamina.

New Active Skill: Crushing Blow
You have learned how to harness the strength of your sword, turning a regular attack into a devastating blow. This skill is more effective if you also know how to aim your attacks.
Skill Level: Intermediate Level 1
Effect 1: 200% increased weapon damage when striking with your sword.
Effect 2: 1% chance to cause bleeding.
Cost: 70 Stamina.

I guess I'm some sort of tank now, Jason thought. He tried to pull up his Character Status to review his stats, but quickly discovered that the option was now grayed out on his system menu. He supposed that meant his statistics were locked.

"Okay, I can handle the class change, but what the hell is this?" Riley demanded.

Jason glanced over at the archer and did a double take. Her clothing had changed entirely. Instead of her usual black leather, Riley was now wearing thick chainmail. However, the armor didn't cover much, stopping just under her breasts and leaving most of her stomach and legs uncovered. It looked like she was wearing a metal bikini and mini skirt. Jason couldn't help but stare in surprise. She looked like she was about to do battle on a medieval beach.

"Umm, what happened to your armor?" Jason asked hesitantly, a bit distracted by her new appearance. He hadn't really seen Riley wearing anything but somber leather armor until now, and he was coming to the uncomfortable realization that she had a fantastic figure.

As Riley caught Jason staring at her, she blushed and tugged at the chainmail, trying to cover herself better with the scanty material. "Eyes up here, buddy."

When she realized that there was no way she could make the chainmail cover herself, Riley's embarrassment quickly morphed into anger. She tilted her head toward the sky to address the god. "This is ridiculous. Where is my *real* armor?"

"Well, I thought maybe you needed a change of wardrobe," the god's voice boomed from the clouds, sounding a little uncomfortable. "We came up with something that we felt would resonate with a male

audience. You know how hard it is to get the menfolk to attend the theater without falling asleep. I swear that Fluffy thought it would be a good idea."

Riley whirled to face the black sheep, and he edged behind Eliza to get out of her line of sight, a guilty look on his face. "Oh, and I suppose you hired some chauvinistic blacksmith to build this, huh?" she retorted angrily, shouting up at the god. "How is this supposed to protect me?"

"Well, it looks like it technically has the same armor stats…" Jason began tentatively.

"Are you seriously inspecting me right now?" Riley demanded, turning to level her glare at Jason.

He put up his hands defensively, "No I just…" As Jason saw Riley's expression, he suddenly decided maybe it was time to shut his mouth.

Riley whirled back to address the god once more, "Give me real armor or I'm not participating in your stupid play."

"I wouldn't exactly call it…" the hippie began.

"New. Armor. Now," Riley reiterated.

"Fine, just give me a second," the Hippie finally replied in defeat.

The group could hear the snap of the god's fingers, and suddenly Riley's armor shifted again. As her equipment completed its second transformation, Jason could see that she was now wearing full chainmail that completely covered her torso, arms, and legs. The Hippie had also provided her with a thick leather cloak – likely to compensate for his mistake.

"Happy now?" the Hippie asked. He sounded a bit moody.

"It's better," Riley replied curtly.

"I wish I could say the same for my dress," Eliza muttered, fingering the thin fabric of her new outfit, a floral print dotting its surface. She didn't look happy, but at least her attire wasn't quite as revealing or impractical.

"I'm not surprised. It appears that our *director* is a pig," Riley said to the water mage.

"Umm, so where exactly is this town we're supposed to deliver the sheep to?" Frank interjected, wisely staying out of the clothing debate that was still raging between the female members of their party.

"It's to the west through the forest," the Hippie explained in a sullen tone. "Speaking of which, I guess I'll leave you to it. Especially since it appears my design choices aren't *appreciated*." The group then heard grumbling and footsteps – followed closely by what sounded like a door slamming.

Jason shook his head, listening to Riley and Eliza complain and watching Frank examine his new notifications skeptically. Meanwhile, the flock of sheep milled about them, nibbling on the grass that swayed gently in the breeze. This new quest was going to be challenging. Putting aside the capricious water god's crazy storyline, they didn't have any of their regular equipment or skills and the sheep would likely be a major liability.

As Jason glanced at the tree line of the forest to the west, he could have sworn he heard a faint howl in the distance. Although, the sound was difficult to make out over Riley and Eliza's conversation. He suspected that this wasn't going to be a simple walk through the forest.

Chapter 24 - Perilous

George was sitting in his office at Cerillion Entertainment looking over a series of reports provided by Francis and Ryan. It appeared that the detective was being overzealous in his investigation and Francis was continuing to face challenges in getting the police department to drop Jason as a suspect. His aunt's house was also still an active crime scene since the detective had ordered a more exhaustive forensic examination of the home.

To make matters worse, George's head of security now suspected that the breakin was initially orchestrated by an outside party – which might partially explain the detective's "enthusiasm." Ryan had obtained records indicating that a series of text messages had been exchanged between one of the teenage assailants and some unknown third party. George was surprised by how much Ryan had uncovered, and he suspected that he had been forced to go through back channels and solicit some help from outside hackers to secure that information. He would have to remember to give him a sizable bonus this year.

George's gaze now lingered on the most troubling part of Ryan's report. "I suspect Alex may have been somehow complicit in the breakin, but additional investigation is required," George read the sentence aloud for the fourth time, the knot in his stomach refusing to unclench no matter how many times he repeated the conclusion.

Alex had withdrawn cash the day before the breakin. His Core had also been deactivated that day, and so there was no way to trace his location. However, a few public cameras had picked up Alex downtown near an electronics store. This was consistent with the story he had told Ryan about visiting an exclusive club – aside from the fact that he was spotted downtown in the middle of the afternoon. That hardly seemed like the time of day to go clubbing.

George jumped slightly as a chime sounded through his office, and he immediately swept away the reports. His secretary popped her head in a moment later. "Robert Graham is here to see you, sir."

"Let him in," George directed, grabbing a small jar from his desk drawer. He shook out a tiny white pill and promptly popped it into his mouth. Swallowing hard, he regretted that he didn't have a glass of water at hand.

Robert stepped into the room a few seconds later and approached George's desk. He slumped down in the chair opposite George. "I'm here for an update on our development project," Robert explained when George didn't greet him immediately.

As Robert took in George's haggard appearance, he hesitated. "Are

you okay? You look kind of tired."

"I'm fine," George answered briskly. He was aware that dark circles hung under his eyes and his suit likely showed small wrinkles – evidence that he had worked through the night. He shouldn't be abusing energy pills like this, but he had been tackling a lot recently with the CPSC breathing down his throat and the lingering issues associated with both Jason and Alex. That was on top of his normal duties running the company.

"So how is your project coming along?" George asked, trying to switch the subject.

Robert tapped at his Core and projected a detailed readout into the air above the desk. "See for yourself. We have made quite a bit of progress in replicating the hyper-cognitive state that Alfred can induce in the players. We aren't all the way there yet, but I expect we are only a few months away."

"Good. Very good," George replied as he looked over the data. Robert had made remarkable progress in such a short period of time. "And Claire? How is she doing? I know I asked you to keep an eye on her."

Robert glanced down, avoiding eye contact. "She has been spending quite a bit of time communicating with the CPSC. As far as I can tell, her reports only relate to the incident between Jason and the game master."

The engineer hesitated, glancing at the city skyline behind George. "There's something else?" George probed.

"She has been asking unusual questions, and she seems especially paranoid of Alfred," Robert began, choosing his words carefully. "I don't have anything concrete yet, but she seems more closed off than normal. She used to get onto me for minor violations of company policy constantly, but now… she almost seems oblivious."

"Perhaps you have finally worn her down?" George offered with a small smile.

"Maybe," Robert said with a chuckle of his own. "But it feels like more than that. I don't have any evidence, mind you. It's just a hunch."

George nodded. "Okay, I'll keep my eyes peeled, and you should do the same. We cannot afford any leaks at this stage. Gloria is already watching us like a hawk. It will only take one slip up to turn this into a PR nightmare."

"I'm aware," Robert replied evenly, his expression sober. "I'll leave my full report with you," he continued, pushing the file to George's machine with his Core. "Let me know if you have any questions after you dig into the details."

"I will," George replied. Then Robert excused himself with a curt nod before quickly exiting the office.

George's eyes followed the engineer as he left, his brow furrowed in thought. He was worried. It felt like he was losing control – like everything was coming unwound, and he was grasping after loose threads. Maybe he

was being paranoid, or this was a product of fatigue, but he just couldn't shake the feeling that something big was about to happen.

* * *

The group walked through the forest, branches towering above them and blocking the sunlight. As soon as they had approached the tree line, the world had immediately darkened around them, the canopy blocking far more light than Jason would have expected. It gave the forest a sinister cast despite the fact that it had been a beautiful day only moments before.

They had decided to put Frank in the lead and have Jason hold up the rear, sandwiching the small flock of sheep between them. Riley and Eliza walked along either side of the herd, Riley's eyes scanning the forest carefully. Eliza looked nervous, and she kept stumbling as her staff caught on the occasional rock embedded in the roadway.

"Do you think this is part of the normal game world?" Frank asked, breaking the unnatural silence that hung over the forest. Jason couldn't even detect the chirp and buzz of insects.

"I don't think so," Eliza replied cautiously, adjusting her glasses. "The Hippie seems to be able to bend time and space inside the game – much like what he did with the first-floor maze. The way this place responds to his suggestions make me think that it's some sort of private instance."

"That seems overpowered as hell," Frank muttered in reply. "Besides, how is creating something like this related to water mana? I only ever see water mages blasting things away with ice – or poisonous fog, I guess," he amended with a glance at Eliza.

Eliza's brow furrowed in thought. "I'm not sure. There are a number of illusion spells in the water school. Maybe this is like an advanced version? However, I've never seen him create something this powerful before…"

"He might be stronger since we're inside his temple," Jason added, keeping a watchful eye on the road behind them. "I bet there is a mana well in the throne room – much like the one we found in the Twilight Throne. I also can't help but think he's drawing on dark mana as well. That's probably why we keep running into undead."

And he probably has access to two powerful magical relics, Jason thought sourly, recalling Lord Baen's quest and his recent visions. Although, he didn't think that revealing that information would help with morale at the moment.

"Hopefully, he'll run out of juice soon," Riley replied in a

frustrated voice, still clearly miffed about the Hippie's attempt to dress her in a chainmail bikini. "Then I plan to deck him. One solid punch straight in the middle of his irritating face. That's all I want."

Jason couldn't help but chuckle. "You better get in line. I think Eliza is in front of you right now." Eliza snorted softly in reply, and he detected a small smile. "By the way, how did your classes change?" Jason continued, "I gained some new shield abilities, and it looks like I'm supposed to be some sort of tank."

"I have a few area-of-effect skills, but everything is melee," Frank replied, swiping at the air in front of him as he reviewed character information. "It looks like all my shapeshifting skills are gone for now."

"Same here," Riley added. "I have a few basic archer abilities, but that's it."

"What about you, Eliza?" Jason asked, noting that the water mage had stayed quiet.

"My skills don't make any sense," she replied with an embarrassed expression, not quite meeting Jason's gaze. "I guess I'm still a caster, but all my spells are sheep-themed. I have no idea how they are going to work in combat."

"Great! So we basically get to wing it with our crappy new classes," Frank complained. "I'm sure our crazy *director* won't throw anything at us that is unfair or one-sided…"

As though Frank had summoned the Hippie, his voice suddenly boomed from the sky, "*Act 2: the players trod sullenly down a dusty road, complaining loudly…* Oh, sorry those are the scene notes. Ahh, here we go!"

The Hippie coughed to clear his throat before beginning again, "*The players wandered down a winding road, yet their nervousness barely showed. Except for the beefy one, he must weigh a ton. His bulk trembled in fear, afraid he might finally meet his peer.*"

"You have to be kidding me right now," Frank muttered as Jason stifled a chuckle.

"Ahem, I said the barbarian was trembling," the Hippie's voice boomed from above the trees. "I don't see any trembling."

"Come down here, and I'll show you some trembling!" Frank shouted at the god.

"As fun as that sounds, I have something different in mind. So, picking up where we left off… Ahh, there," the god said to the sound of shuffling paper. "*Yet up ahead the group heard a howl, it seemed that monsters were on the prowl!*"

As the Hippie finished speaking, the already foreboding forest darkened further until it appeared that night had fallen. An eerie howl came from the woods around the group, sending a shiver up Jason's

back. The group scanned the tree line anxiously as the sheep bleated softly in fear and huddled toward the center of the roadway.

"Group up and keep your eyes peeled," Jason ordered, pulling the shield from his back and unsheathing his sword. The weapons felt awkward in his hands, even though the game supplied the memories of how to use them.

The group held their weapons at the ready and peered into the murky gloom that now hovered around them. Howls and yipping sounds occasionally echoed from the trees. Without warning, a dark form leaped from the trees from the rear, barreling toward Jason. He just barely raised his shield before a crushing weight descended upon him and knocked him onto his back. The air exited his lungs in a rush, and his sword clattered to the ground nearby, ripped from his grip by the unexpected charge. He struggled under the massive creature, its fangs gnashing at the air in front of his face as he struggled for breath.

A giant black wolf hovered above Jason, its body nearly eight feet long. Droplets of saliva rained down on Jason as he barely kept the beast at bay with his shield, which was thankfully still strapped to his arm. He could hear the shouts of his friend nearby and the howl of other wolves, but no one came to his rescue. His mind raced as he realized that they must have been attacked by the rest of the pack.

Jason glanced to his side and caught sight of his sword lying nearby. He strained toward it with his free hand, already beginning to feel his strength failing under the weight of the wolf. Its claws gained purchase on his shoulder, tearing through his chainmail like butter and plunging into his flesh. With a scream of pain, Jason stretched farther, his fingers just barely scraping against the hilt of his sword. Finally grabbing hold of the weapon, he immediately plunged the blade into the wolf's neck, stabbing over and over again as he used *Crushing Blow*.

Blood rained down on his face, momentarily clouding his vision. The wolf lunged forward in desperation, its fangs snapping shut mere centimeters from Jason's face. As the creature retreated, Jason stabbed forward again, his blade sinking into the wolf's eye. A moment later, he felt the monster slump against him, unmoving. Its remaining eye gazed at him dully.

Jason's breath came in ragged gasps, and he could still hear the shouts and growls of combat being waged around him. He took a breath and summoned his strength, shoving the dead wolf's body off him and swiftly rolling out from under its weight. As he made it back to his feet, Jason finally had a chance to survey his friends' progress.

A decapitated wolf lay beside Frank. Two more of the huge beasts were growling at him and a third beginning to flank him from the side. Riley stood near the flock, another dead wolf lying near the

edge of the forest with nearly a dozen arrows embedded in its neck and face. As Jason watched, Riley released another arrow. The bolt sped through the air and struck the neck of the wolf trying to flank Frank with a dull thump. The creature yelped in pain before retreating into the woods.

Meanwhile, Eliza stood in the middle of the tiny flock, watching Frank swing wildly at the remaining two wolves to keep them at a distance. She took a breath, and her staff began to glow a brilliant pink. The sheep began to bleat frantically, their voices creating a crescendo of noise that echoed through the forest. A glowing pink aura enveloped the rest of the group, and a notice appeared in the corner of Jason's vision.

System Notice

You are affected by the buff, *Bleat of Battle*. Your primary statistics have all been increased by 15% for the duration of the spell.

Jason didn't have time to ponder on the nature of the buff or appreciate more of the Hippie's bad jokes. The two wolves facing off against Frank were growing frustrated and were preparing to lunge at the barbarian.

Run! Jason mentally screamed at himself. He felt frozen, staring at the gaping maws of the two monstrous animals. He no longer had his dark mana to numb him to the tension of combat, and he felt… weak.

"Jason, snap out of it!" Riley called from his side.

At her shout, Jason slapped himself forcefully with his mailed gauntlet – shaving off a tiny sliver of his own health. He didn't have time to be afraid. His friends were in danger. With a massive effort of will, he started moving, sprinting toward Frank. He raced past his burly friend, triggering *Shield Bash* and slamming his metal shield into one wolf's head. A shower of blood erupted from the impact, and the wolf reeled from the blow. Frank followed up quickly, his two-handed sword descending in a massive strike that partially severed the wolf's head. The creature promptly dropped to the ground with a dull thump.

A thunderous growl sounded from beside Jason as the other wolf lunged forward. An arrow immediately embedded itself in the creature's eye, throwing the wolf off course. Jason took the opportunity provided by Riley's attack and used another *Crushing*

Blow. His sword speared the wolf's neck, sinking deeply into its flesh. A moment later, the monster slumped to the ground unmoving, and Jason's blade slid free, crimson blood dripping from the metal.

Silence once again descended upon the road, only interrupted by the gasping breaths of Jason and his teammates and the soft bleating of the sheep. Four of the giant corpses now littered the ground, and the flock was huddled against Eliza, their bodies shivering and their eyes still wide in fear as they stared at the dead wolves.

"*Our mighty heroes cheered, their exploits were sure to be revered*," the Hippie's voice rang out across the forest. "*Yet the clock was still ticking, and the group shouldn't stand around…* erm*… dickering! The sun will soon be setting and lingering in this forest could be quite upsetting.*"

"That last one wasn't exactly a rhyme," Frank said sourly. "You basically used the same word twice."

"Well, it was close. Ever heard of a near rhyme?" the Hippie demanded. "Of course not! You haven't honed your craft like Fluffy!"

Frank just shook his head in irritation, cleaning his sword on the fur of one of the dead wolves. Jason looked at the corpses with a morose expression, wishing that he could raise the beasts. Unfortunately, the Hippie had removed that as an option.

"We should probably move," Jason suggested quietly, hearing more howls echoing in the distance. "His terrible rhyming aside, the Hippie's message was sort of clear. At least one got away, and he might return with friends."

"Agreed," Riley said. "Let me help you, Eliza," she offered. The water mage was nearly buried in terrified sheep, and it took a few precious minutes to calm them down enough to get them moving again.

The group opted for moving at a brisk jog to get out of the forest. With their new classes, they hadn't fared well in that last encounter, and none of them were anxious to repeat the experience. As usual, Frank took point and scanned the woods carefully. Every time they heard an errant howl, they immediately dropped into a defensive formation and waited patiently for a few seconds before moving on.

As they traveled, Jason's thoughts wandered back to the battle. He had frozen during that last encounter. Frank and Riley had both easily taken out a wolf by themselves, and he had just barely killed one – and only after it had caught him by surprise and he dropped his weapon. He hated to admit it, but he was completely out of his element.

Nearly thirty minutes later, the group emerged from the forest with the flock of sheep in tow. As they exited the tree line, they were

confronted by blinding sunlight. The rays of light illuminated a town nestled between two picturesque mountains. Jason could only assume that this town was Griswald. Streamers of smoke drifted from the chimneys of several houses built of heavy stone and thick wooden planks. He could just make out townsfolk milling between the buildings.

"I thought our *director* said it was almost night time," Frank said, glancing up at the sky and covering his eyes with one hand. "It looks like it's midday."

"Oh! My apologies," the Hippie exclaimed, his voice booming from the clouds. "I read the notes wrong, Fluffy's handwriting is terrible. Just give me a second."

At the sound of the god's fingers snapping, the sun swiftly drifted toward the horizon. Suddenly, it was nearly dusk, the sun setting behind the mountain range framing the village. The town had also changed subtly, lanterns and torches abruptly appearing along the streets as the townsfolk stopped what they were doing and glanced around in confusion.

"This is so weird," Riley said, watching the rapid change.

"No kidding," Frank muttered. "But I guess we have no choice but to march into town with a bunch of sheep and find this guy in a *white frock* – whatever the hell that means."

As Riley and Frank started toward the town, Jason noticed that Eliza looked troubled, her gaze downcast and her brow furrowed in thought. "You okay?" Jason asked.

The water mage looked up in surprise, appearing a bit startled. "Yeah… yeah, I'm fine," she said. "It's just…"

Jason waited for Eliza to continue. Clearly something was troubling her.

"I guess I just feel guilty."

"Guilty?" Jason echoed in surprise. "For what?"

Eliza looked embarrassed, her eyes focused on the ground as they walked. "The Hippie forced me into this," she muttered. "Back at the inn in Falcon's Hook, I mean. He made me come on this quest with you and your friends, and now I've pulled you into his craziness."

Jason shook his head. He could only imagine what this game had been like for Eliza – spending weeks with the Hippie's constant heckling and insanity. "You didn't cause this. We were going to come to this temple anyway, and I suspect the Hippie would have been just as irritating if you weren't here," Jason assured her.

"I'm not sure about that. I feel like something else is going on…" Eliza replied quietly. "The Hippie forced me to be his avatar and said his siblings were doing the same – mentioning some sort of competition. He knew about you too," she said, glancing at Jason

quickly. “But after meeting you and your friends… I don’t want to compete with you.”

Jason watched her carefully. This was interesting. It appeared that the Hippie had been a little more talkative than the Old Man. “Did he explain why the gods are choosing avatars?”

“Not really,” Eliza said, shaking her head in frustration. “He just complained about his siblings, and then it quickly devolved into his usual nonsense.”

The pair lapsed into silence for a moment as Jason mulled on that. Something strange was going on with the gods in-game. Why would they all be choosing avatars? The Old Man had been a bit more circumspect in his explanations, but Jason had also gotten the impression that they were competing for something. Eliza’s admission now confirmed that. To make matters worse, his frequent visions weren’t exactly providing any more clarity.

Yet none of that addressed the worried expression on Eliza’s face. She seemed conflicted and shy most of the time, but there were rare moments when she had opened up to Jason and his friends. He wasn’t certain that he really wanted to compete with her either.

“Well, you are your own person and so am I,” Jason finally replied. “Which means we get to choose what we want to do – not some crazy god. If you don’t want to put up with his nonsense, then don’t. Honestly, I think Fluffy might be the only redeeming part of putting up with the Hippie anyway,” he added with a soft chuckle.

Eliza smiled slightly, and Jason noticed that the black sheep stood up a little taller where he walked along beside them. “I guess,” Eliza replied. “Thanks for being so nice,” she added.

“I’m not that nice,” Jason replied dryly. “How many people have we killed so far on this trip?”

“You know what I mean,” Eliza said with a grin, finally meeting his eyes. “Thank you.”

“Hey, hurry up!” Frank called from in front of them. They both looked over to Frank and Riley where they stood near the edge of the town.

Jason and Eliza hurried to catch up with the rest of the group, the sheep grudgingly trotting to keep up with them. As they neared, Jason saw that Frank and Riley were speaking with a lanky man wearing a white apron. His long hair was bound in a ponytail behind his head, and a puffy, unkempt beard hung from his chin.

When he caught sight of the sheep, the man exclaimed, “Finally! I’ve been waiting for you to arrive for weeks! Did all twelve make it in good shape?” he murmured as he began counting the sheep. They edged away from him nervously as he approached, their eyes wide and uncertain.

“This is Rupert,” Riley explained to Jason. “Apparently, he is the *man in the white frock* that we are supposed to deliver the flock to – or sheep rather. I’m really getting tired of the rhyming by the way.”

“Glad to make your acquaintance,” Rupert said, whirling and offering a hand. Jason was surprised by the man’s viselike grip and winced slightly as they shook hands. “Sorry about that,” Rupert commented with a grin as he noticed Jason’s expression. “A strong grip is a side effect of working in the kitchen day in and day out.”

“Oh, and Rupert here is a cook,” Frank said, looking at Jason with a raised eyebrow.

“Not just a *cook*,” Rupert snapped, sparing a glare for Frank and placing an indignant hand to his chest. “I am one of the very best *chefs* in Griswald.” He turned to face the flock. “And these beauties are intended for the local mayor’s upcoming feast.”

The flock seemed to understand the man’s words, moving quickly away from the chef. Jason noted with interest that Fluffy was now standing directly behind Eliza and peering out from behind her dress. “So, I guess that means we’re done…” Jason began slowly.

“Not quite,” Rupert interrupted. “This group looks a little skittish. Would you mind bringing them to my restaurant? It’s only a few minutes away.”

“Not at all,” Jason replied in a cautious voice. The rest of his group were also eyeing the man skeptically. Something felt off about Rupert, but Jason couldn’t quite place his finger on it. “Why don’t you lead the way,” Jason offered.

“Will do!” Rupert replied, before starting off at a brisk pace toward the interior of the town.

“This feels weird,” Riley whispered to Jason as they walked through town. “Why would Fluffy write a play about bringing sheep into town for slaughter?”

“I don’t know,” Jason replied. “But we have no choice but to play along for now.” He met her gaze and could see the worry in her eyes. “Let’s be on our guard.”

Chapter 25 - Delectable

Two green-robed mages stood near the edge of a circular stone disc. The platform had been embedded in the hilltop's mossy ground, vines and soil partially covering the stone. The two mages were stooped over a panel and gesturing animatedly. The hill overlooked the nearby valley, Vaerwald's massive floating discs outlined in the orange glow of the setting sun. Players and NPCs milled around the platform below the city as they struggled to enter before nightfall.

Without warning, two dark missiles erupted from the nearby tree line and whistled toward the mages. A pair of dull thumps sounded as the bolts struck home, and the men promptly slumped to the ground unmoving.

"As easy as shooting fish in a barrel," Tom laughed, dropping from a nearby tree and slinging his bow across his back. Another group of travelers dropped from the trees nearby and immediately took up a defensive formation around the platform. One man stopped to check the dead mages for spare equipment.

"You should show more respect for the death of two mages," Gracien groused as he approached, slamming his staff into the ground. "Even if they are members of the earth guild," he continued, eyeing the fallen men. This earned the fire guild master a derisive snort from Tom and a few skeptical glances from the other players.

"Are you going soft on us now, Gracien?" Caerus asked in a sickeningly sweet voice as he and Alexion approached with their Confessors and nephilim in tow. The Confessors kept a tight formation around Alexion, and his nephilim immediately took flight to scout the area around them. With night approaching, they would be nearly invisible in the skies unless they used their light magic.

"Not hardly, but I don't relish the deaths of my fellow mages," Gracien retorted with a glare at the noble. "You know that I do this only to alert the council to the threat the Twilight Throne poses."

"You have to break a few eggs to make an omelet," Alexion interjected with a grim smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Think of this as collateral damage on the path to Vaerwald's salvation. What are a few lives if they might save thousands?"

Gracien shook his head. "Then show me this omelet. What is our next step?"

"Tom and his team will secure the disc," Alexion explained, trying to keep the contempt from his voice. Sympathy was for the weak and the foolish. "As you so kindly explained, this platform acts as a secondary entrance into Vaerwald in the event of an emergency. In our case, it will

enable us to avoid the city's tube system or alerting the other travelers and citizens to our presence. Tom's travelers and our own forces will then infiltrate the city's lower levels."

"With the undead slaves we captured in Sibald, of course," Caerus added, gesturing at the undead that were being brought up from the rear.

Alexion grimaced at being interrupted by the noble, but he managed to silence the insidious whisper in the back of his mind that demanded he put Caerus in place. "Our casualties in Sibald were unfortunate," Alexion bit out. "However, the silver lining was that we were able to repurpose the equipment of the Twilight Throne troops."

The undead looked beaten and haggard as they approached, their skin marred by jagged wounds that had gone untreated. They were a motley assembly of captured slaves, deserters, and Twilight Throne soldiers, but Alexion had armed and attired the entire group in the dark leather armor that was customary among Jason's forces. The equipment was still stained with congealed blood, but that would hardly matter in a few hours.

"Interesting," Gracien murmured as he surveyed the undead, walked up and down the line. He spared a kick for the occasional slave that dared to look in his direction. "I suppose this lot will do. Yes, they will do nicely. I should be able to sell your story to the council."

"I'm glad you approve," Alexion replied dryly.

"The platform is ready," Tom reported from where he stooped over the platform's control panel. "We just need to load everybody onboard, and then we can ride this sucker up into Vaerwald." An excited grin was plastered on the player's face, and his teammates looked equally anxious to be off. Perhaps Alexion's promise of unrestrained looting and pillaging had inspired them.

"Good. Then let's get started," Alexion announced as he boarded the platform and his troops and slaves followed closely behind him.

A moment later, he felt the platform shudder, and it slowly began to rise into the air, dirt spilling from the edges of the disc. As he took in the sight of the mage city approaching, he tuned out the anxious conversation of the players and soldiers around him. Alexion felt a subtle weight press down on his shoulder, and he smelled a faint hint of perfume. A slow smile crept across his face. This next part was going to be entertaining. He could only hope that his mother was watching.

* * *

"And here she is!" Rupert announced, gesturing at a nearby building. After walking for a few minutes, the group had arrived in front of an unassuming storefront. Wooden paneling dotted the front

of the structure, and a terrace had been installed on the second floor. A sign hung beside the door, gently swaying in the breeze and announcing that they had arrived at "The Butcher's Block."

"Uh, it looks great," Frank replied hesitantly as he noticed Rupert looking at them expectantly. There was no noise coming from the interior of the restaurant, and its windows were dark.

"It *is* great," Rupert replied with a broad grin. "This is the best gastropub in all of Griswald."

"Are there many *gastropubs* in town?" Riley asked, glancing at the nearby buildings skeptically. The rustic medieval town hardly seemed like the place for fine dining.

"Well, technically no," the chef said, his smile faltering. "But this is still the best eating establishment in the area. We work culinary magic within these walls."

"I don't really see any customers," Frank commented, looking at the building and the street around them. "What about that place across the street? It looks packed." Indeed, patrons were practically spilling out of the door of the pub across from The Butcher's Block, and the occasional shout or jeer could be heard from the street.

Rupert's expression fell further. "That's just a *bar*. Anyone can pour some stale, watered-down beer in a mug. What we do here at the Butcher's Block is *art*. It's an experience for your taste buds."

Frank snorted skeptically, earning him a glare from the chef. "That sounds interesting," Jason interjected tactfully, giving Frank a sharp look. There was no sense failing this nonsensical quest by choosing their words poorly. "Your restaurant must be fantastic if you are catering the mayor's upcoming feast. Would you mind giving us a tour?"

"Sure thing!" Rupert exclaimed, Frank's slight immediately forgotten in his excitement. He unlocked the door and pushed it open, the hinges screeching in protest as the door swung open ever-so-slowly. "Come on in. We are shut down tonight to prepare for the feast, so you can bring the flock in through the front."

As the chef entered the building, followed closely by Frank and Eliza, Riley placed her hand on Jason's arm. "I have a bad feeling about this," she whispered quietly.

"Me too," Jason replied, glancing at the open doorway. "Our quest hasn't updated, which isn't a good sign. I suspect that this means we can still fail. Technically, if any sheep die, we lose."

"Which doesn't strike you as weird? Why are we handing the flock over to this slightly unstable cook?" Riley asked. "He hasn't exactly been shy about his plans to butcher them."

"This whole thing is odd," Jason replied with a grimace and a glance at Alfred who sat calmly nearby. He was beginning to suspect

that the AI might be the crazy one – after all, he was responsible for creating the Hippie. At a minimum, he seemed to have a fondness for unusual characters. “Let’s just be careful. There’s not much else we can do.”

Riley nodded grudgingly, and they both entered the restaurant, Alfred padding along behind them. Inside, they discovered that the dining room was pure chaos. Tables had been pushed up against the walls and chairs were stacked in haphazard towers. The room was poorly lit by a series of lanterns. The timid flames were entirely insufficient to illuminate the large dining area. The combination of the flickering light and oddly-stacked furniture caused grim shadows to be cast along the walls.

“This isn’t exactly making me feel better,” Riley murmured.

Jason just shook his head, noting that Frank and Eliza were talking to Rupert near the back of the dining room. The sheep were huddled against a far wall, standing as far away from the lanky chef as they could.

“It looks like you still have some work to do to get this place set up,” Frank commented as Jason and Riley approached, gesturing at the room.

“Yes, yes,” Rupert nodded enthusiastically. “We had to reorganize to host all of the mayor’s guests. Our regular arrangements wouldn’t do at all. No, not at all.”

Riley swiped her finger along one table, coming away with a thick coating of dust. She glanced meaningfully at her finger, and Jason’s frown deepened. This place hadn’t been used as a restaurant for a long time.

“But this is just the dining area, you all still need to see the kitchen,” Rupert continued, seemingly oblivious to the group’s growing concern. “That’s where the culinary magic happens, after all!”

With that, the chef pushed through a set of swinging doors into a back room. The group followed him cautiously, their hands resting on their weapons and the sheep staying far behind. Even Fluffy seemed nervous. He cowered behind Eliza, her hand idly stroking his head to calm him down.

The kitchen turned out to be enormous, easily able to fit a dozen cooks and other restaurant staff. Long tables lined the walls, and pots and pans swung from iron hooks. Serving and preparation stations had also been set up along the interior of the room, hosting a variety of extremely sharp-looking knives and utensils.

What caught Jason’s attention, however, was the oven along the back wall. The brick and mortar structure was at least ten feet tall and spanned nearly the entire length of the wall. A bonfire rested at

the foot of the oven, massive flames licking at the brick compartments. Even at this distance, Jason could feel the waves of heat radiating from the oven.

"And this is my laboratory of sorts," Rupert said, grabbing a poofy chef's hat from a table and placing it gingerly upon his head before turning back to the group. "What do you all think?"

"It seems sort of hot in here," Jason said, gesturing at the oven. "Is that really necessary?"

"Oh, the oven?" Rupert asked in surprise, glancing back at the roaring flames. "You get used to it after a while. Honestly, I don't even notice it anymore."

"It's like a million degrees in here," Frank retorted skeptically, tugging at the neck of his armor.

"I think it might be scaring the sheep," Eliza added.

Jason turned and discovered that the flock was trembling along the back wall and were all staring at the flames with wide, terror-filled eyes. "Maybe we should take them back outside," Jason offered.

"No, no, no," Rupert interjected. "We need to get started on our preparations for the feast. Perhaps grilled lamb chops with a mint sauce. Now I know what you're thinking, that's rather traditional, but I think we can put an interesting spin on it…"

As Rupert was speaking, he picked up a cleaver resting on one of the worktables, admiring the shine of the metal. He ran a finger across the blade to test its sharpness, leaving a small trail of blood in its wake as the blade easily sliced into his skin. Yet the cook seemed unperturbed by this, a manic grin creeping across his face.

"You know what?" Jason began, edging back toward the doorway and motioning to his teammates to retreat. "It's rather late, isn't it? Perhaps we should step back outside and find somewhere to stay for the evening. I'm sure we could get started early tomorrow."

"Tsk, tsk," Rupert replied, turning his head to meet Jason's gaze. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that. As I said, we *must* get started tonight." He took a step forward toward the group, and their hands immediately went to their weapons.

"Stay where you are," Frank cautioned, pulling his two-handed sword from his back and hefting the heavy weapon.

"Would you really stand in the way of my artistry?" Rupert demanded, stopping short and his face contorting in anger. "Would you deny the people of this town the delight of sampling my fine cuisine?"

As the chef kept speaking, his voice began to deepen unnaturally until he was almost speaking in a growl. The cleaver was still raised in his hand, and his eyes had taken on an unnatural cast, glimmers of flame reflected in his irises.

“Are you just like the rest?” he shouted, railing at the group and gesturing wildly. “Would you turn me away because I wish to achieve culinary greatness? Spurn me like the other residents of this misbegotten farce of a town?”

Rupert suddenly bent over, his body shuddering and jerking erratically. “Are you okay?” Riley asked cautiously, but she made no move to help the cook. Instead, she unslung the bow from her shoulder and nocked an arrow. Meanwhile, Frank moved forward, putting himself between the cook and the rest of the group.

The chef didn’t answer. Instead, the jerking grew worse, and he let out a tortured, hoarse scream. His body began to contort violently, bulges appearing along his skin and his flesh splitting and fracturing. His limbs grew rapidly, doubling in size before their eyes and splitting the ivory fabric of his frock. Within seconds, Rupert had grown dramatically. Red bleeding welts appeared along his skin, and blood dripped down his clothing, swiftly staining his gruesome form crimson.

With a final jerk, his movements quieted. Then his massive hand slammed against the surface of a work table, the wood splintering under its weight. His grotesque fingers groped for a cleaver and wrapped around the hilt. As he lifted the weapon, it also began to change, lengthening and growing until the blade was nearly three feet long – now matching the weapon still held in his other hand.

Rupert raised his head. His face was now blood-red, and his eyes were awash with flames that matched the fire raging behind him. He surveyed the group and the sheep cowering behind them hungrily. “Ah… fresh meat,” he growled. “I have been looking forward to this for some time. Tonight, I will feast.” His mouth opened in a manic grin, revealing rows of cracked and splintered teeth.

With a lunge, Rupert raced toward them, his thick legs slamming against the floorboards and causing the wood to splinter and crack. Frank reacted quickly, stepping forward and meeting the creature’s rush. Rupert’s cleaver slammed against the barbarian’s sword, causing a spray of sparks to shower the area around them. The force of the blow sent Frank stumbling backward a few steps.

“Eliza cast your buff and stay back near the sheep,” Jason ordered. “Riley, keep some pressure on him.”

Riley immediately released, her bolt slamming against the creature’s skin and ricocheting against a table. The blow caused little damage, but it managed to distract the monster.

Meanwhile, Eliza moved to the back of the kitchen, huddling with her flock. A pink light began to emanate from her staff as her sheep began their chaotic, discordant song.

And now I get to try not to fail at fighting, Jason thought grimly.

He could feel fear wash over him as he looked up at the creature that had once been Rupert, its maw hanging open and flames curling away from its eye sockets. Yet he forced himself to draw his sword, his knuckles white around the hilt.

He swallowed against the pit in his stomach and willed himself to move. Jason rushed forward, pulling the shield from his back and pushing his left arm through the leather loops. As he neared the monster, it shifted its weight, and a cleaver sped toward Jason. He barely dodged the blow, ducking under the monstrous weapon and thrusting at the creature's leg while using *Crushing Blow*.

His sword glanced off Rupert's skin, barely penetrating his flesh and leaving a thin trail of blood. Rupert followed up immediately by backhanding Jason with the flat side of his other blade, throwing him across the room. Jason slammed into a prep table, pots and pans spraying in every direction with a crash of metal.

He shook his head to clear it, glancing at his party UI and seeing that the single attack had carved off a fifth of his health. Frank hadn't fared much better. His health had already dipped, and bloody gashes dotted his body, evidence of several close calls.

With a roar, Jason rose to his feet and charged against the monster again. This time, he acted more defensively, the ring of metal echoing through the kitchen as the monster's cleaver glanced off his shield. The blow brought Jason to his knees, and he immediately rolled away. The floorboards splintered as Rupert slammed a cleaver into the ground where Jason had knelt a moment before.

Riley used this opportunity to pelt the creature with arrows, some of the shafts embedding themselves in his skin. Yet Rupert barely seemed to notice the attacks. Giving a growling howl, he swept forward toward Jason again with his cleavers in a frantic flurry of blows.

While Rupert was distracted, Frank moved behind him, swinging his two-handed sword high over his head. With a scream, he slammed his blade into Rupert's back, the metal swiftly embedding itself in his flesh and a torrent of blood spraying from the impact. Rupert slumped forward for a moment. Coughing harshly and dropping a cleaver, his free hand slammed against another prep station to support his weight.

Before Jason could celebrate, a harsh laugh escaped the creature's lips, and the wound began to knit back together at an alarming rate. "You think that's enough to stop me? To stop my *hunger*?" Rupert demanded, looking up at the group. His eyes were now raging infernos and were wild with madness.

Frank moved quickly to recover his sword, wrenching the blade free before it was entirely buried in Rupert's flesh. The weapon came

free with a sickening sucking sound, more blood spilling on the floor. Rupert whirled, his cleaver crashing against Frank's sword in a shower of sparks as he threw the barbarian across the room.

Then the former chef turned back to Jason, who stood with his shield raised. His thoughts raced as he tried to figure out how to slay this beast. It seemed to be regenerating, much like the Packrat. Yet without their real abilities, they had no way to injure the creature enough to defeat it. Even Riley's arrows weren't finding much purchase on its thick skin.

Jason stood in indecision as he tried to think of something – *anything* that could injure the beast. Yet Rupert suffered from no such reservations. He barreled forward, and his cleaver sliced toward Jason, crashing into his shield and causing Jason's knees to buckle and his arm to go numb. The beast continued to slam his weapon against Jason's shield repeatedly, the metal buckling and bending under the force.

Red notifications flashed in Jason's peripheral vision, and he struggled to think of something that could get him out of this predicament.

"*Craft Circle*!" Eliza suddenly cried from behind Jason. He felt air rush past him and he glanced up as Rupert's next blow failed to land. A pink glow surrounded Eliza, and giant braided bands of gray yarn held the former chef's grotesque form in place.

Some sort of entanglement spell? Jason wondered.

The effects of the spell were short-lived, and the monster gave a massive heave, tearing apart the braids that bound it in place. "Is this all? I was expecting a better show to go with my meal," Rupert growled before cackling madly at his own joke.

Frank was regaining his feet behind the creature, his health redlining. Jason wasn't in any better shape. His shield was nearly destroyed, and a glance at his notifications indicated that his left arm was broken, limiting his range of movement. In contrast, they had barely damaged Rupert.

There has to be some way to kill him, Jason thought frantically. The dull ache in his arm was making it difficult to think clearly. *We just don't have enough firepower.*

Then his gaze rested on the oven on the back wall. If their weapons wouldn't work, then maybe they needed to use the environment. The only question was *how*. As Rupert turned to face Frank, Jason shouted at him, "Frank, try to distract him!" Jason frantically pointed at the oven behind the creature's back. "I just need a second!"

Frank gave a curt nod before darting back into melee. Meanwhile, Jason sprinted back to Riley and Eliza, cradling his

broken arm to his chest but forcing himself to keep ahold of his shield. The floor was slick with blood, and he nearly fell as he reached Riley. She grabbed him, managing to keep him upright. “What should we do?” she asked anxiously.

“Oven… behind him,” Jason gasped, trying to make himself heard over the crash of metal behind him. “Eliza entangle… trip him.”

“I’ll distract him,” Jason continued as he began to catch his breath. “You’ll only have one chance.”

“You already know I don’t miss,” Riley said with a small smile, despite the fear that lingered in her eyes. “Just go.”

Jason didn’t need to be told twice, he spun around and sprinted back to Frank and the creature. Frank had managed to lure Rupert near the oven, the creature’s back to Jason. The two were trading monstrous blows, and Frank was barely able to parry Rupert’s attacks.

I just need a few more seconds…

Yet Jason could already see that he was too late. With a final massive blow, Rupert slammed his cleaver against Frank’s sword, the metal cracking and then breaking in half in a shower of metal fragments. Frank hit the ground hard, the pieces of his weapon crashing down around him. Without ceremony, the monster raised its cleaver high into the air.

“Frank, move!” Jason screamed, running as fast as he could.

Time seemed to slow for a brief moment as the cleaver hung in the air. Then it descended all too quickly, the metal carving into Frank’s flesh and severing his arm at the shoulder as his screams filled the room. Fresh blood jetted from the wound, and Frank’s icon on Jason’s party menu immediately went gray as notifications flashed in his peripheral vision.

“God damn it!” Jason shouted.

He didn’t slow his headlong charge. As he neared the creature, it turned languidly, watching Jason approach with something akin to amusement. “Go ahead, underestimate me, you asshole,” Jason screamed.

As he saw the creature preparing to swipe with his massive cleaver, Jason swallowed his fear and gave into his anger and rage. Instead of dodging below the chef’s attack, he leaped. His foot touched lightly against the metal blade of the monster’s weapon, and he jumped again, hurtling toward Rupert’s grotesque, grinning face. He activated *Shield Slam* and poured every ounce of strength he had into the blow.

Jason’s shield struck the creature in the face, a spray of blood and fragmented teeth rocketing from the impact site. The creature stumbled from the attack as the stun effect triggered, taking a tentative step backward.

At the same time, Eliza finished casting, massive braids of wool racing through the air and binding Rupert's legs, preventing him from catching his balance. He tottered backward, taking another stumbling step. His bound legs connected with a carefully positioned sheep, its black body having hidden it from sight as it crept toward the oven.

Rupert tripped, tumbling backward and landing heavily in the raging flames of the oven. His body was immediately consumed by the inferno. The fire spread across his skin at an unnatural rate as his hoarse, tortured screams filled the room. The flames were eating away at his flesh faster than he could regenerate, pockets of blood popping and sizzling in the heat.

"I will not die, here. Not like this!" the beast screamed, struggling to pull its burning body out of the flames.

Jason wouldn't let him. Ignoring the fire that singed his skin, he stood over Rupert and slammed his shield against the creature's face again and again and again, blood spraying in every direction.

It wasn't until he felt Riley's hand on his shoulder that Jason finally stopped. He flinched under her touch, lowering his bloody shield slowly. "It's over," she said. "He's dead."

Jason stood there, his chest heaving as he stared down at Rupert's ruined face, his rage-filled blows having reduced the creature's disgusting, demonic features to a bloody pulp. The monster's body lay unmoving, his skin black and scarred by the fire.

"And Frank?" Jason asked.

"He's dead, so my guess is that he respawned in the temple," Riley answered quietly.

Jason turned, taking in the destroyed kitchen. Pots and pans were strewn about the room, and they had overturned nearly every table, blood coating most surfaces. Eliza stood with her sheep, petting Fluffy as he danced around her enthusiastically – proud of his contribution in slaying the demonic cook.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked tentatively.

"I'm fine," Jason said, yet his answer rang hollow. He wasn't fine. He hadn't been fine for a long time. This was just another ridiculous situation piled on top of the endless stream of crap that both his real life and this game world seemed to heap on him.

"You don't look fine," Riley replied, her words echoing his thoughts and her fingers still lingering on his shield arm. "It looks like you screwed up your arm royally," she added as she inspected his wounds.

The metal of his shield had been caved in so that the material now wrapped around Jason's forearm, essentially locking it in place. He could also still feel the dull throb that was the game's way of telling him that his arm was broken. Riley gingerly pulled at the

metal, slowly removing it from his arm and revealing his battered and bruised flesh.

"Jesus," she hissed when she saw his arm. "Here, drink this," she offered, handing him a healing potion. "Apparently, the Hippie didn't steal all of our equipment and Eliza had a few spares."

"Thank you," Jason replied, tugging out the stopper with his teeth and downing the contents. His arm immediately began to heal – the bones in his forearm snapping back into place and his flesh knitting itself back together.

As Riley moved to step away, Jason stopped her. "And thanks, Riley. For everything. I know I've been more sullen and reserved than usual lately. I've just been dealing with a lot."

"I know," she answered, meeting his gaze and pushing a few tendrils of blonde hair out of her eyes. For a moment, Jason felt an odd pang. She looked weary and battle-worn, sweat and droplets of blood staining her clothes. She still looked beautiful. This was Riley in her element – not wearing some chainmail bikini or a school uniform. This was the *real* Riley. Someone who could slay monsters and didn't flinch away from his injuries.

Someone who always had his back.

"What is it?" Riley asked, her eyes searching his. Her face hovered only a few inches away, and Jason's mouth suddenly felt dry.

Jason was about to reply when the Hippie suddenly interrupted, his disembodied voice echoing through the room. "Well, that was an exciting, climactic conclusion to our play! You all were victorious!"

With a snap of the irritating god's fingers, the kitchen began to dissolve around them, and Rupert's body disintegrated. A moment later, they were all standing back onstage in the auditorium. A roar of sound reverberated through the stone amphitheater, and the source soon became apparent. The Hippie stood in the stands along with the rest of his undead audience, their decaying hands clapping rhythmically as they gave the group a standing ovation. Even Felix clapped his skeletal little paws from his perch on the Hippie's shoulder.

Jason glanced around the stage in confusion, noticing that all of his teammates were present. He hesitated as he noticed Frank standing nearby, his burly arms crossed, and a frown plastered on his face as he glared at the Hippie. He nodded at Jason when he noticed him watching. "I'm glad that crazy plan worked," he said quietly as the applause continued. "Otherwise we were all toast. Maybe literally," he added with a small smile.

Jason returned his grin, sparing an awkward look at Riley who still stood beside him. Her attention was now on their undead

audience. The moment had passed.

Leave it to the Hippie to ruin everything, Jason thought bitterly.

"Encore, encore!" the Hippie shouted.

"Not a chance in hell," Frank shouted back.

"Now that's not the sort of demeanor we would expect from the cast. Take a bow, relax. You should be reveling in this moment," the Hippie replied, his voice magically enhanced so that it boomed through the room.

"Speaking of which," the god continued, "We should celebrate the MVP of our story, our very own Fluffy! Give him a hand, folks!"

The black sheep peeked out from behind Eliza, glaring at the Hippie. He gave a soft snort and turned his back on the capricious god. Apparently, he also hadn't enjoyed being inserted into the Hippie's crazy play.

"Ahh, don't be that way, Fluffy!" the Hippie exclaimed, waving at the undead to stop clapping.

"Do you really blame him?" Eliza demanded, sounding uncharacteristically angry as she petted Fluffy's head reassuringly. "You did direct a play about a crazy demonic chef that wanted to devour a flock of sheep."

The god's normally carefree expression sobered as silence slowly descended upon the amphitheater. "Hmph. Some people just don't appreciate the fine arts.

"*Anyway*," the Hippie continued, waving at the group with a dismissive hand. "As I said before, you should be celebrating. You just defeated the second-floor guardian of my temple!" A small smile curled the corners of the god's lips. "Besides, you should savor this moment. I expect the next and final encounter will be a bit more challenging."

Chapter 26 - Depleted

"Sweep the houses on both sides of the street," Alexion shouted. "Take the lowborn captive and deliver them to the nephilim to take back to the platform. Move quickly! We don't have long!"

Full night had descended upon Vaerwald and flames were wrapped around his Confessors' fists, the dancing light illuminating a chaotic scene taking place on the mage city's lower levels. Alexion's guildmates and Confessors leaped to follow his orders, breaching the houses on either side of the street in a flash of flame and a crash of wood. Screams erupted from the interior of the buildings as his men pulled families from their homes. Anyone who resisted was immediately cut down, their blood soon staining the dusty streets.

Alexion was unperturbed by the violence around him. In fact, the void in the back of his mind thrummed with pleasure as his troops bound his future sacrifices and moved them back along the disc to where they had left their platform.

"How long until the fire guild guards show up?" Alexion demanded of Gracien who stood beside him. The normally surly mage's face was clouded as he watched the city's lowborn residents being pulled from their homes. "Gracien!" Alexion shouted, trying to snap the mage out of whatever fugue had overcome him.

"I have delayed our forces and sabotaged the tube system," Gracien answered, his voice rough and uneven. "We should have nearly an hour before the city's forces show up."

"Plenty of time," Alexion murmured, ignoring the mage's sudden reluctance. It was too late to back out now. Gracien had made his choice, and he would have to live with the consequences.

Caerus came trotting up, two nephilim guards in tow. "Sir," he greeted Alexion with a nod.

"How is it going?" Alexion demanded.

"We have already captured nearly a hundred civilians," Caerus reported. "As you ordered, we have been planting the occasional undead corpse among the buildings."

"And the witnesses?" Alexion asked. Their plan relied on pinning this act purely on Jason. Their goal was to make Vaerwalds' council think that this was a raid to capture corpses to increase the Twilight Throne's population.

"We have been slaying any residents that resist and Tom's group has been dedicated to picking off any stragglers that may be out late at night. However, the noise of our attack is impossible to ignore. The rest of

this level may respond soon, and it will be impossible to hide our presence."

"There are just too many people. These lowborn breed like rabbits," Gracien interjected. "As I've explained, there will be witnesses. These old buildings are riddled with hidden compartments used for hiding contraband."

"Damn it," Alexion muttered. He needed their story to hang together, and he had badly underestimated the population density of the mage city's bottom level.

How am I going to fix this? Alexion thought.

The world around him stuttered, and red notifications flashed in his vision. For a moment, he saw a female form dressed in a white hospital gown weaving in between his troops as they ran through the street – seemingly unaware of the woman's presence.

As Alexion watched in fascination, the woman slowly stooped and picked up a stray torch before walking to one of the buildings and resting the flames against the home's dry, ancient boards. The fire immediately began to spread, hungrily devouring the wood. Within moments, the building was a raging inferno, and the flames had started to spread to the nearby structures.

The figure then turned back to Alexion, her face obscured by her hair and blue veins running along her pale skin. In a flash, she rushed toward Alexion until she was standing only a few inches away. "Let them burn. Let them all burn," his mother whispered.

"Are you alright, sir?" Caerus asked.

As soon as the noble spoke, Alexion's mother vanished. He blinked rapidly in confusion, glancing around the street. The flames were gone, and the buildings were still intact. Yet his mother's message had been clear. He couldn't leave any survivors that might tell a different story – he didn't have any other choice.

"Tell the Confessors…" Alexion began, his voice harsh, "Tell them to burn it down. Burn it all down. We can't leave any witnesses."

"What are you thinking?" Gracien demanded, whirling on Alexion and his eyes angry. "This wasn't part of the plan! You run the risk of the fires destroying the entire level."

"We are adapting to the circumstances," Alexion responded in a cold voice, turning to look at the fire mage master. "We have no other choice at this stage."

"Adapting? The fires will destroy any evidence of the undead. How will we pin this on the Twilight Throne?" Gracien slammed his staff into the ground, his eyes now aglow and flames curling around him. "That was the entire point of this exercise."

At a subtle gesture from Alexion, a contingent of nephilim encircled the mage and Caerus drew his blade. "Let me rephrase," Alexion said calmly. "You can either stand down, or we can ensure there won't be 'any'

witnesses – including you."

Gracien glared at the soldiers, their spears leveled at him. "You will regret this," the fire mage master growled, yet his flames were already beginning to recede.

"I doubt it. Who will believe you if you try to explain what really happened here? Besides, you are just as culpable as we are at this stage," Alexion replied, turning to look back at his troops scurrying down the street.

A moment later, one of the ancient buildings was engulfed in flame – the fires spreading rapidly through the dilapidated homes of the lowborn. Soon, most of the bottom level of Vaerwald was in flames, thick smoke drifting into the sky and obscuring the view of the next disc hovering above them. As Alexion looked on, he could feel his mother's approving hand on his shoulder once more. Nothing would stop him from attaining his goals. Nothing.

* * *

"Alright folks, the show's over," the Hippie said, turning back to the stands and snapping his fingers. The undead lining the rows of stone benches immediately slumped to the ground, their bodies breaking apart in a deafening crescendo of rattling bones.

"This feels sort of anti-climactic after all that build up and poor rhyming," Frank grumbled. "Hell, we didn't even get any loot!"

"Ahh, that reminds me," the Hippie replied, walking onto the stage. Frank did a double take, glancing at the stands where the god had been standing only a moment before. It seemed that he could teleport around the temple with ease. "As a reward for participating in our play, we have some prizes! Well, *prize* – singular. You'll have to share."

The god waved his hand, and a wooden chest appeared onstage. Its surface was nondescript, and the metal bands running along its side were rusted with age. The group eyed it suspiciously, no one moving to open the box. Fluffy actually took a few steps backward.

"What? What's wrong?" the Hippie demanded after noticing their reaction.

"Is it going to explode?" Riley asked. "Or maybe teleport us into the middle of the lizardman camp?"

"Or summon a horde of undead?" Frank offered.

"Or drop us into the Tentacle Horror's cave? Or put me back in a dress?" Eliza grumbled as she adjusted her glasses and watched the

chest nervously.

"Honestly, there's probably a risk that it turns us all into skeletons," Jason said. "Could you imagine being stuck here as the Hippie's enslaved audience?"

Eliza laughed, trying to smother the sound with her hand when she noticed the water god glaring at her. "You know, you lot are just ungrateful. And after I put you in the limelight. I made you the stars you are! If you are just going to make jokes at my expense, I'll be off." With that, the Hippie abruptly vanished, taking Fluffy and Felix with him.

"I believe we might have upset him," Jason said with a chuckle.

"Good, he had it coming," Frank replied.

"So… in all seriousness, who's going to open the chest?" Riley asked.

"I vote Frank," Jason offered. "All in favor?" Eliza and Riley immediately stuck their hands in the air, followed closely by Jason.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Frank asked, eyeing each of them in turn. "Why do I always have to be the guinea pig?"

"You're good at it," Jason replied. "Plus, you're the least likely to get blown apart."

"Cowards," Frank muttered, stepping carefully over to the chest. The rest of the group took a few steps back as the barbarian's hand rested on the lid. Without further ado, he flipped open the lid and dove back.

When no explosions rocked the stage, and the group wasn't teleported to some random location, Frank lifted himself from the ground and eyed the others sheepishly. He then pulled out the chest's contents, a leather band with a small bell attached. Frank dangled the necklace, listening to the tinkling sound of the bell.

"What is it?" Jason asked.

"A necklace, I guess," Frank replied in a distracted voice, his eyes scanning a prompt that the rest of the group couldn't see. "Here," he offered, handing the necklace to Jason. He quickly inspected the item.

Beastmaster's Collar
This collar is crafted from exquisite leather and merely touching the necklace conjures images of a vast wilderness. The bell is also an excellent touch for recalcitrant teammates. This way, no one in your group will lose you.
Quality: B
Durability: 45/50
+10 Strength

+5 Vitality
+5 Endurance
(Soulbound)

Grants Passive Skill: Wilderness Lore
Unlocks the skill, *Wilderness Lore*, which enables the wearer to obtain detailed information on various animals, including racial abilities and skills.

Jason had to stifle a laugh as he reviewed the item information and Frank was looking everywhere but at him. “So, this might be an item for Frank,” Jason began slowly. “It looks like it will provide information about various animals, which would probably go well with his shapeshifting abilities.”

“The bell is a cute addition,” Riley offered diplomatically, a smile creeping across her lips.

“Oh, shut up,” Frank muttered, snatching the collar back and grudgingly equipping it.

“It really does look good on you,” Eliza added with a small smile. “It sort of reminds me of Fluffy’s collar.”

“Not you too,” Frank groaned with a woeful look in the water mage’s direction. “These two are bad enough as it is.”

As the group continued their banter, Jason took the opportunity to review his remaining notifications. With a swipe of his wrist, he pulled up his prompts.

Quest Completed: Mary Had a Little Quest

Your party has completed the Hippie’s mad play – to a standing ovation no less! You all should be proud of your performance, despite the fact that Fluffy sort of stole the limelight. The completion of this quest allows you to proceed to the next level of the temple.

Difficulty: B
Success: Deliver the herd safely to the contact in Griswald.
Failure: Allow any of the sheep to die.
Reward: Completion of the temple’s second floor.

x2 Level Up!

You have (25) undistributed stat points.

One of the unanticipated downsides of the Hippie's play was that Jason's other skills hadn't advanced. However, a glance at his skill menu and Character Status sheet at least confirmed that he had regained his summoning and casting abilities. He was thankful for that. The experience had proven to him that he had no interest in playing a melee character.

Perhaps I should give Frank more credit, Jason thought, watching his friends tease each other. *Fighting face to face with some of these creatures is terrifying*.

"Who's a good boy?" Riley cooed at Frank, trying her best to pet the barbarian. Frank was having none of that, and promptly transformed his legs into their wolf form and jumped into the stands to get away from the archer. Meanwhile, Eliza stood nearby laughing at their antics.

"So, what's next?" Riley asked Jason when she realized she couldn't chase Frank around the room.

"I guess we head up to the next level," Jason replied, gesturing at the broad staircase that wound up between the stands. "Although, it's pretty late in the real world," he added, glancing at the clock on his system UI. "Everyone want to call it for the evening?"

"I could use a break," Frank shouted from the other end of the room. "You guys are jerks!"

"You can come back over here," Riley yelled back. "I promise I won't try to pet you. Much…" she added in a quieter voice.

"I also need to do some homework," Eliza mentioned with a heavy sigh.

"Okay, based on the Hippie's comments, this will probably be the last room anyway. "Same time tomorrow?" Jason asked.

His group all nodded and began logging out, flashes of multicolored light briefly illuminating the amphitheater. As his friends disappeared, Jason's gaze shifted to the empty stands, a troubled frown creasing his forehead.

He wasn't sure what to expect when they reached the top level of the temple. The visions of the Keeper and his son were disconcerting – especially with the Hippie's manipulation of dark mana. He expected that this next encounter was going to be rough. They were likely going to be facing some sort of creature that could use both water and dark mana.

"And I assume you aren't going to give me any hints," Jason commented, glancing at Alfred who sat nearby.

"The terms of our arrangement have not changed," Alfred

replied calmly.

The cat hesitated, glancing to the side as though thinking about how to phrase his next sentence. “I would suggest, however, that you move quickly. Events inside the game world are escalating rapidly,” Alfred finally said.

“Well, that’s pretty cryptic,” Jason said. “Can you elaborate?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Alfred responded. “The best I can do is urge haste.”

Jason could feel the ever-present worry gnawing at his stomach. He had a lot to juggle already, and they were running out of time to complete the Priestess’ quest. He also hadn’t uploaded any videos to Robert and Claire over the last few days. He wasn’t even sure how to edit the footage of their journey through the temple with the heavy-handed involvement of the water god. He didn’t want to tip off the general player population to a secret competition among the game’s gods.

With a sigh, Jason rubbed at his eyes. He felt tired, and he needed some food and some rest. He couldn’t deal with any of these problems right now. “Alright, I’m going to call it. Bye, Alfred.”

“Goodbye, Jason,” Alfred replied. Then his feline eyes glazed over, the AI likely abandoning the creature and refocusing his attention on other parts of the game world.

Jason pulled up his system menu and logged off.

A moment later, he found himself back in his new bedroom at Cerillion Entertainment headquarters. With a groan, he lifted himself up from the bed, stretching his aching muscles. It felt like he had worked out for hours. Based on how sore he felt, he could only assume that Alfred had decided to ramp up his physical therapy while he was in-game.

“Maybe he wants me to run a marathon next,” he muttered to himself.

His stomach growled loudly, reminding him that he had been plugged in for most of the day. It had been a long time since breakfast with Robert, and he had skipped lunch. With another sigh, Jason exited his room and headed for the apartment’s kitchen.

As he entered the hallway, Jason could hear a crash coming from the kitchen, followed closely by a loud exclamation and cursing. “You stupid piece of shit!” Angie’s voice rang down the hallway, causing Jason’s forehead to wrinkle in confusion and his steps to quicken.

The object of Angie’s wrath soon became apparent as he entered the kitchen in a rush. A torrent of water was jetting from the sink, spraying parts of the ceiling and the cabinets. Puddles had already formed on the tiled floor, and his aunt’s hoodie was soaked,

droplets of water streaming down her cheeks.

"Sink off!" his aunt yelled at the appliance, pushing frantically at the buttons along the sink's rim at the same time.

Jason jogged into the kitchen and quickly pressed the "off button" on the sink – the fountain of water immediately stopping. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking at his aunt.

"I've been better," she replied in irritation, water dripping down her face and a frown curling her lips. "I just can't get used to these appliances. They all seem to be automated and hooked into the apartment's AI, but they don't respond to commands."

"They might not have registered your voice with the apartment AI," Jason said, his brow furrowed in thought. "They probably only had my info on file. I can talk to Robert and get him to change it."

Jason went back into the hall and opened a closet door, hoping to find some fresh towels. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that the apartment was well-stocked with sheets and linens. "Here." Jason offered his aunt a towel as he came back into the kitchen. He dumped the remaining towels on the larger puddles.

I might also have to ask Robert for a mop, he thought with some amusement as he surveyed the drenched kitchen. Angie had really done a number on their new apartment.

"Well, I made a big mess," his aunt commented, echoing his thoughts as she took a seat at the counter and toweled off her face.

"It's okay, we can get this cleaned up," Jason replied before taking a seat beside her. "What were you trying to do?"

"I was *trying* to fix some dinner. Although you can see how that turned out," his aunt said with a self-deprecating chuckle.

"Oh. Robert said we can use the restaurant upstairs – it's free. I bet they also have an ordering feature," Jason added, pulling up his new Core to see if Robert had installed an app for the restaurant. It turned out that the engineer had thought that far ahead. A few quick strokes later and Jason had some dinner on the way.

"There we go. It should be about twenty minutes," Jason said.

"Thanks, Jason," Angie replied.

He turned to find his aunt watching him carefully. "How are you holding up?" she asked, concern in her voice. "You look exhausted."

"I am," Jason replied. "There's just… there's just so much going on."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I guess, although I'm not sure how it'll help," he replied quietly. The knot in his stomach clenched just thinking about the issues he needed to tackle.

"Honestly, I'm not even sure where to start," he began. "I killed

two kids, and I'm still being investigated. Your house is a crime scene, and I got you kicked out. I think I've been conscripted by in-game gods in some sort of competition, but I'll be damned if they have explained what I'm supposed to do. We're also now dependent on George, and I haven't been uploading any videos lately." Frustration colored Jason's voice as he rattled off his problems. He had to catch himself before mentioning Alfred.

"Oh, and my parents are completely checked out now. I forgot to mention that part!" he added bitterly.

"Wow, that is a lot," his aunt replied slowly. Angie placed her now damp towel on the counter and chewed on her lip in thought. "But maybe you're taking on some problems that you don't need to…"

"How so?" Jason asked in confusion.

"Well, those two teenagers died, but that was clearly self-defense. One of them was armed. I think the police will come to that decision given some time. Francis is fighting that battle."

His aunt gestured at the apartment. "As for our new living arrangements and my house, I'm a grown woman. Other than not being able to figure out how to use the sink, I've managed to survive for a long time before you came along," she added with a soft chuckle. "If this doesn't work out, we can always find another place.

"As for Awaken Online, just give it time. I'm sure things will work out. You seem more than capable of handling yourself in-game."

His aunt placed her hand on his, her free hand forcing him to meet her gaze. "Which leads me to the most important point. You aren't in this by yourself. You don't need to tackle all of these problems on your own. You have me, and you have your friends. It's okay to lean on other people a little."

Jason just looked at his aunt. For some reason, her calm, reassuring words helped unwind the knot in his stomach. Maybe she was right. Maybe he was just building up these problems in his own head instead of relying on the people around him.

"Thanks, Angie," he said, tears budding at the corners of his eyes. "I needed to hear that."

His aunt nodded, patting his hand lightly. "Besides, you're just a kid. You should be having some *fun*. Hang out with your friends. Do some things you enjoy. Go on a date or something! I haven't seen you leave this apartment since we moved in. Not that you were super social before, of course."

Jason laughed, wiping at his eyes. "I am a little bit boring."

"I don't know that I'd go that far," his aunt replied with a chuckle. "I don't think anyone could claim that your life is boring. But you need to do some regular teenager stuff. Isn't there someone you could ask out or something?"

Jason hesitated, his thoughts immediately turning to Riley. He couldn't shake the image of her standing beside him, battle-worn and beautiful. He just wasn't sure how to act on his feelings – if that's even what they were. After her experience with Alex, he really wasn't sure how open she would be to the idea of dating.

"Oh, it looks like I hit on something," Angie said with a broad smile. "Let's go. Give me some details. I don't get enough juicy gossip sitting behind a workbench all day."

"I'm not sure this really counts as juicy gossip," Jason replied in a dry tone. "Honestly, I'm not sure if I'm just reading into it, but I guess there's a girl that I'm sort of interested in. Her name is Riley."

"You mean *the* Riley. I've seen some of her videos. That girl kicks some serious ass. And this is coming from your old fuddy-duddy aunt," Angie said with a smile.

"She's pretty cool," Jason acknowledged quietly, his eyes on his plate. "I just don't know if there's anything there. Like, sometimes it feels like she might be interested… but at other times it feels like she's just a friend." He hesitated for a moment, lost in thought. "Then there's her baggage with Alex – her last boyfriend. He basically blackmailed her."

"Wow. Now that's some drama," Angie said, her eyes wide.

A chime interrupted their conversation, and Angie stood to answer the door, returning with a bag a moment later. "It looks like our food arrived," she announced, opening the sack and placing Jason's dinner in front of him.

"I could get used to the free delivery," his aunt mumbled between mouthfuls. "Especially since it's impossible for me to screw this up!"

Jason smiled slightly in response, his thoughts still on Riley. He picked at his food until his aunt finally spoke up again, breaking the silence. "Honestly, it sounds like you are interested in this girl."

"I guess," Jason acknowledged.

"Definitely, or you wouldn't be wringing your hands about it," Angie insisted, stabbing a fork at him to emphasize her point. "I'm not saying I'm the master of relationships – far from it actually – but I've screwed up often enough to learn a few things. My advice is that you should just ask her out. You can sit and try to work through the 'signs' to try to determine whether she's interested. However, you won't really know until you talk to her."

"That's easier said than done," Jason grumbled. "Especially with her history."

"Really?" his Aunt demanded, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "This coming from a guy that can rule an undead city and publicly challenges millions of players at the drop of a hat? But you're nervous

about asking out a girl?"

His aunt chuckled to herself before popping another bite into her mouth. "Maybe I should talk to Robert. Since you haven't been updating your stream, I bet this would be *fascinating* to your fans and enemies."

She smacked the table with her palm, laughing out loud. "Ahh, I've got it. I can see the headline now. *Zombies, Ghouls, and Girls: How to Get a Date as an Evil Overlord."*

"You wouldn't!" Jason said, his eyes widening and his cheeks feeling unusually warm.

"Maybe," Angie replied with a grin. "Like I said, I don't get my drama fix during the day."

"Jerk," he muttered, bowing his head over his plate to hide his reddening cheeks.

This earned him another chuckle from his aunt. "Come on now, I'm kidding," his aunt offered. "But I still stand by my advice. Just ask her out. Do it in-game if it makes it easier. You seem to be in your element there."

"Maybe," he replied noncommittally. He'd have to think about what Angie said.

"Or you could just give up," she suggested. "Honestly, I've seen pictures of Riley. She's probably out of your league anyway," she added with a laugh.

"That's rich," Jason shot back with a smile of his own. "Especially coming from someone who just flooded our kitchen and is still sopping wet."

As Angie and Jason continued trading barbs, he could feel himself relaxing for the first time in days. His aunt was right. He wasn't alone. And as much as he hated to admit it, she might also be right about Riley. He'd have to mull over that. For now, he would try to forget his problems – at least for one night.

Chapter 27 - Corrupted

Eliza pulled off her headset with a sigh, the interior padding catching on her hair. She had spent a long time in the game world, and her body felt stiff and unwieldy. As she lay on her bed for a moment, she could hear the telltale sounds of her parents in the kitchen downstairs, their voices drifting up to her bedroom.

Her gaze shifted to her desk nearby, books and papers piled on the tabletop. The house's AI responded to her shift in attention, a digital screen appearing above the desk and reverting to her calendar. She could see a series of days marked out with little 'X's.' She only had a few more days left until her parents were going to force her to focus full-time on her schoolwork again.

"Remove my calendar," Eliza said aloud, and the image immediately disappeared.

With a soft sigh, she lifted herself up and trudged over to her desk, slumping down in her chair. The house's computer replaced the image on the screen with a series of forum posts and videos from Awaken Online. Perhaps she had been spending too much time reading about the game if the computer knew her that well.

She froze as she saw one of the thumbnail images. It showed a familiar-looking tavern, one she had spent many hours in over the last few weeks in-game. She tapped the link cautiously, not sure what to expect.

A video immediately popped up on her screen. It showed the perspective of a player, his identification information posted in the bottom right-hand corner. Eliza's hands clenched as she confirmed his location – Falcon's Hook. The player's gaze panned over the crowded tavern, the drunken sailors attired in a motley assemblage of green and purple. Then a crash drew his attention and his gaze shifted to the side.

Eliza's breath caught as she saw herself come into frame. Her table had been overturned, her potions strewn about the room. As she watched herself, the digital Eliza stood from the table, her eyes flashing a brilliant sapphire as she channeled her water mana. She pulled a wand from her pack, and her free hand moved through a familiar series of gestures. Even as a dense cloud began to form around her body, tendrils curled away from the cloud and began to spread.

Her Obscuring Mist promptly rolled over the room, players and NPCs gasping and choking. The player's vision was obscured for a moment as he quickly covered his face with the hem of his cloak. When he pulled the garment free a moment later, Eliza's petite form stood among a pile of unconscious bodies. The player started to move but froze when he saw

several figures approach Eliza.

Jason's unmistakable, dark form drifted through the tavern, followed closely by Frank and Riley. His cloak billowed out behind him, and his face was obscured from view. He strode forward with confident steps, unconcerned about being attacked by a girl that had just knocked out an entire room of sailors. Watching the scene from a different perspective, Eliza now understood why. Frank and Riley were heavily armed, and their weapons had been drawn beneath their cloaks. If anything had happened, Eliza would have been dead instantly.

Yet Jason made no move to attack her. Instead, she saw him stoop to help her pick up her crafting materials and vials, familiar words leaving his lips. "If you don't mind me asking, what's your name?" he asked.

"My name is Eliza." She heard herself reply quietly.

"Well, Eliza, what you just did to these sailors was incredible. I've never seen anything like it. By the way, my name is Jason, and this here is Frank and Riley," Jason said, gesturing at his friends before standing and offering her a hand up.

"Freeze the video," Eliza ordered, a knot settling in her stomach. The screen froze on the image of Jason extending his hand, his two teammates looking on cautiously. Worry blossomed in her chest, and she flicked the image to the side, her eyes skimming down to the video's detail information.

"5 million views…" she muttered, the knot in her stomach feeling like it was growing by the minute. Then her gaze shifted to the comments to the video.

Warbeaver: *Who is this girl and what did she just cast? She took out an entire tavern in about sixty seconds!*

Renkaii: *I think it just incapacitated them.*

Kryptic: *Who cares? Did you see who approached her? Is that really Jason?*

Warbeaver: *That seems like Frank and Riley in the background. At least they match their descriptions.*

Evan: *Shit. Original Sin is in Falcon's Hook? And I just got here*

hoping to avoid more PK'ers. Just perfect…

Kryptic: *Do you think this girl is part of their guild?*

Eliza swiped the comments away, her eyes closing. This wasn't good. What if her parents discovered she was hanging out with Jason and his group? They were sort of clueless when it came to AO, but almost everyone had heard of Jason. His videos had been plastered all over the internet for weeks. Would they take the game away from her completely? Just the thought of losing AO made her feel a little sick.

She opened her eyes, her gaze centering on the frozen image of Jason offering her a hand. He and his teammates were the first friends she had made in a long time. They were good people – despite their online personas – and she finally felt like… like she belonged. As silly as that might be…

Eliza's hands clenched into fists, her eyes filling with determination as she shook off her mental hand wringing. This was the sort of thing her old self would have done – not the accomplished person she had become in-game. She didn't want to give up AO or her newfound friendship with Jason and his group. She wouldn't give it up!

* * *

Jason had already finished Robert's next set of grueling programming assignments and his self-imposed reading. He was now sitting in the Hippie's amphitheater, his feet swinging over the edge of the stage. His thoughts kept coming back to his recent visions and the conversation with his aunt the night before.

Maybe Angie was right. Maybe he needed to lean on his group more. Which probably meant leveling with them regarding his visions. He had been keeping that information close to the chest, afraid of their reaction if he revealed he was hallucinating memories from some ancient undead ruler.

Jason's gaze shifted to the broad set of double doors at the top of the auditorium. His friends deserved to at least have a hint of what they were about to walk into – not that Jason really knew what to expect from this last level of the temple. However, four brains were better than his rather confused and distracted one.

"I see you're ready to rumble," Frank said, interrupting Jason's

thoughts as he logged in with a faint popping sound, followed closely by Riley and Eliza.

"Something like that," Jason replied with a grin.

"I'm guessing you've come up with some master plan for tackling this next level?" Riley asked, taking a seat beside Jason on the stage.

He spared a glance at Riley, noting the way she sat so close to him and the familiar way her arm bumped against his. *You're just reading into things again. She's a friend*, he reminded himself, his recent conversation with Angie still fresh in his mind. *This isn't the time to get distracted.*

Shaking his head to clear it, Jason replied, "Not exactly, but I want to talk to you all for a second before we tackle this next part."

"This sounds ominous," Frank replied. "You kill somebody… again? Okay, okay, I'm sorry!" he amended quickly, putting up his hands to ward off Jason's glare. Meanwhile, Riley stabbed at his foot with her dagger and Frank jumped back quickly. "It's too soon! I get it!"

"What did you want to talk about?" Eliza asked, rolling her eyes at Frank and stepping over to join the group along the edge of the stage.

"This quest feels strange. I originally thought it was just a race change quest, but it feels like it's somehow tied up with the gods in this game. Eliza mentioned the other day that the Hippie has implied that there is some sort of competition between the in-game gods – which might explain why they're choosing avatars from among the players."

"Yeah, you've mentioned this in the past," Frank said, motioning for Jason to get on with it.

"Okay, so here's the new part. I've also been seeing these… visions, I guess? It's been happening for a while now, but they've become more vivid since we came back from Peccavi and started on this quest. It's like the world sort of stutters, and then I'm seeing a flashback from the perspective of someone else," Jason said, gazing at the floor.

"First it was visions of weird fire demons attacking a city like the Twilight Throne. I also think I saw a Keeper using *Undead Devotion* like I did in Peccavi – to give people a second chance at life. These feel sort of like memories, but now the visions are more personal."

"How so?" Riley asked. Jason could see that his other teammates were leaning forward, waiting for him to continue.

"I think all of these visions have been from the perspective of a Keeper," Jason continued, his brow furrowed in thought. "Before, they lacked a narrative and seemed random, but now they are focused

around the Keeper and his son visiting this island. The events must have taken place a long time ago since the temple was still intact and there were no lizardmen."

"The Keeper and his son, Noah, kept alluding to something called the 'Purge' – whatever that is – and they were being chased by human soldiers," Jason explained, his fingers worrying at the hilt of one of his daggers. "The Keeper was injured passing through the mists, and his son caved in the entrance to the temple."

"Did the Keeper have this book we're looking for?" Frank asked.

Jason nodded. "I think so. He was hiding something under his cloak, which could have been the grimoire, but I never saw him pull it out."

"So that's why you mentioned earlier that the Hippie might be controlling dark mana?" Eliza offered, adjusting her glasses. "You knew – or at least suspected – that a Keeper had brought the grimoire here."

"Exactly," Jason replied. "That's why I'm nervous about this next encounter. We might be facing something that is using both water and dark mana."

"Fantastic," Frank muttered. "Although, these last couple levels of the temple are at least beginning to make more sense."

"Do you have any idea where this is all heading?" Riley asked cautiously. "It seems like you are only getting fragments."

"I'm not sure," Jason said. "Collecting the grimoire is part of a race change quest based on Morgan's research. That seems sort of clear. However, how this possible competition among the gods or this 'Purge' fit into the story is a mystery to me." He shook his head. "The Old Man has been typically cryptic as well."

"I take it that this *Old Man* is the dark mana deity?" Riley asked, meeting his gaze.

Jason nodded in reply.

"At least he doesn't seem as talkative as the Hippie," Frank said with a chuckle. "We haven't seen him once. It sounds like you lucked out compared to Eliza."

Eliza was frowning, her gaze focused on the rough stone floor of the amphitheater. "So you saw the Keeper and his son enter the temple, and they may have had something to do with activating the temple's defenses," she said aloud. "Which also means that they might still be up there… They were undead, right?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," Jason replied with a weak smile. "Although the Keeper was badly injured in my last few visions. I got the impression that he didn't have long left.

"Well, if they are still alive, isn't that a good thing?" Frank

asked in confusion, glancing at the group. “Aren’t these guys on our side?”

“Has it really seemed like anyone has been on our side so far?” Riley retorted. “I mean we pretty much have every player and NPC in the game gunning for us right now. We also just got sucked into a magical play, and this island is being overrun by lizardmen – who we’ll probably end up betraying. Or did you forget that we haven’t killed that Tentacle Horror thing? What are the chances this Keeper and his son are going to invite us to sit down to tea?”

“Okay, fair point,” Frank replied with a grin.

“After saying it out loud, I’m not sure how much this really helps,” Jason added quietly. “But you guys deserved to know what we may be walking into.”

Frank snorted. “It sounds like it will either be a friendly old man that’s going to politely hand us the tome and this orb thing, or some sort of water-dark mana hybrid monstrosity that will take us out in one blow.”

The burly barbarian hesitated. “You know, now I kind of agree with Riley. We’re going to get destroyed, aren’t we?”

Riley suddenly stood up, checking her equipment and a determined look settling over her face. “Maybe, but there’s no sense sitting here and worrying about it. We just need to keep moving and be on our guard. I say we buff up and then check out this new floor.”

Frank let out a sigh, and Eliza nodded in agreement before rummaging through her pack in search of potions. Meanwhile, Jason was still a bit lost in his thoughts. It felt like he had a few of the pieces, but they didn’t quite form a complete picture. It was aggravating.

“You coming?” Riley asked. Jason looked up to find the dark archer holding out her hand. Behind her, Frank was already chugging multicolored potions like he was taking shots.

“I guess so,” he replied with a small smile, accepting her hand up.

“You need to slow down!” Eliza cautioned Frank. “If you drink too many potions, you’ll barely be able to walk or see straight. The blood toxicity warning is not a joke.”

Frank hiccupped violently. “Worth it,” he replied, his voice slurring slightly as he gestured to Eliza to hand him another potion. “You heard Jason. We’re going to be fighting some un-killable death machine!”

Jason had to stifle a chuckle. “I think you can cut him off now,” he suggested to Eliza.

Frank lunged for a potion and the water mage swatted at his hand. She then snatched away the remaining vials before he could

grab them, handing a couple to Jason. “These will give you more mana and health,” she explained, before moving on to Riley and handing her a few potions.

Jason downed the content of the little vials, noting with interest that they offered a pretty sizable bonus. He checked through his equipment to make sure everything was in order. That just left one problem. He needed some minions. His gaze turned back to the amphitheater, recalling that the Hippie had simply abandoned his undead audience before they logged out the evening before. There were likely a large number of bones now lingering about the empty theater.

Taking a deep breath, Jason began channeling his dark mana. The chill energy immediately flooded his veins and clawed its way up his spine before settling behind his eyes. He took a moment to revel in the sensation, the icy feeling sweeping away his worry and doubt. Then he began casting *Custom Skeleton*, summoning the undead corpses around the room in waves – dark energy crashing and curling through the air.

The undead horde slowly shambled back to their feet, now obeying Jason’s commands. A glance at his summon information informed him that he had raised dozens of the creatures. They were armed and armored in a collection of rotting and rusty equipment. They would be useful, but likely for nothing more than cannon fodder.

Frowning, Jason decided to change that. After waiting a moment for his mana to regenerate, he cast *Custom Skeleton* again, this time loading the editing panel. Time slowed to a crawl around him, his teammates barely moving.

After reviewing his control panel and his available resources, Jason debated briefly what to make. There were nearly two hundred corpses in the room, including the skeletons he had already raised. He could only assume that these were the remains of the humans who had been chasing the Keeper and the crews Lord Baen had sent after the orb.

He also noted with a grimace that he had about sixty spots available toward his Control Limit – after accounting for the minions he had left back on the mainland and the sailors that were still being held hostage by the lizardmen. He couldn’t summon all of the corpses in the room, but he should at least try to use all of the available materials.

Not knowing what they were likely to encounter, Jason was going to have to be conservative. He needed something resilient and flexible. Ideally, it should also be a creature that could protect his group while Riley and Frank laid down some damage.

“I suppose it’s time for a classic,” he murmured after glancing

through his list of saved designs. Making a decision, he slammed his fist down on the control panel.

His new skeletons and the remaining corpses immediately broke apart and a whirlwind of bones whipped through the amphitheater. Jason's mana pool bottomed out as he funneled his dark energy into the spell. Moments later, the bones began to take shape once more. Knitting themselves together with bands of dark mana, a series of colossal monsters formed around the theater.

Nearly thirty Death Knights soon towered among the stands, their horned skulls turning to face Jason as the last bones snapped into place. Massive spikes jutted from their shields, and their skeletal tails lashed at the air around them menacingly. It had been a while since Jason had first summoned these creatures and a closer inspection revealed improvements in the way their shields and armored plates were formed – likely a result of his heightened *Bone Crafting* skill.

"Are those Death Knights?" Frank asked, walking up beside Jason once the bones had stopped whizzing through the air.

"They are indeed," Jason said, forming three bone shields with the remaining corpses. He then mentally commanded his minions to line the sides of the stairwell leading to the next floor. The thunder of footsteps echoed through the auditorium as they took up their positions. "The original corpses the Hippie left behind were poorly armed. I figured we could use something a little more resilient since we don't know what we'll be dealing with."

"Makes sense," Frank replied, his words slurring slightly, and a lopsided grin plastered on his face. "It…hic…it's just interesting to see you back in your element. I've kind of gotten used to carrying you."

Jason snorted. "That's ironic coming from the guy who basically dropped us down a hole."

"That was a *tactical fall*," Frank retorted, gesturing wildly.

"If you guys are done flirting, we should get going," Riley said, pulling the bow from her back and nocking an arrow. "Besides, we all know that Eliza and I have been the ones carrying us. What would you all have done without our healing?"

"Exactly. Mobile potion dispensary at your disposal," Eliza said with a mock salute.

Jason and Frank stared at her blankly for a moment, so taken aback by her joke that they weren't exactly sure what to say. Then Frank started to laugh, his humor dispelling some of the remaining tension that lingered in the air after Jason had revealed his visions to the group.

"That's… ha…sorry," Frank gasped. "That was just so weird coming from you."

Eliza folded her arms, looking a little offended. “I’m going to chalk this up to the fact that you’re intoxicated right now,” she said, walking past him and starting up the stairs.

Jason just chuckled, patting his potion-drunk friend on the back as they started the climb up to the next floor. His Death Knights stood in formation on either side of the staircase, towering over the group as they walked past. At a mental command from Jason, they closed ranks behind the group, marching in two neat columns and their feet thudding against the stone floor rhythmically.

A moment later, Jason and his teammates stood in front of a broad set of double doors. The portals loomed nearly twelve feet into the air, and the wood was aged and cracked. The massive iron handles embedded into the doors had been carved to resemble flowing waves, yet age and rust had marred their appearance over time.

“I’m guessing that this is going to lead directly into the last room or floor,” Jason said, glancing at his map. “It looks like we’re only a couple dozen feet below the surface now.”

He turned to look at his teammates. They looked tense but prepared – their knuckles white as they gripped their weapons. “You all ready?”

“Ready,” Riley and Eliza replied.

“Ready Freddy,” Frank slurred. Jason assumed that was good enough.

Without further ado, two of his Death Knights pushed open the massive doors, and the group stepped through the doorway. They immediately found themselves in what appeared to be a throne room. The entry hallway was rather tight but quickly angled outward into a gigantic rectangular room. As they stepped inside, blue torches along the walls flickered to life, illuminating the chamber. They found themselves facing a stone throne against the far wall.

The group filtered into the room quickly, taking up their usual positions. Frank took the lead, both of his battleaxes held at the ready. Jason ordered a dozen of his Death Knights to stand in formation around the barbarian. His remaining minions flanked Jason, Riley, and Eliza near the rear, their bone shields held at the ready.

The group stepped forward in this defensive formation, keeping a watchful eye on the throne. As they moved, the torches along the walls continued to erupt in a sapphire glow, revealing more and more of the room. Jason could barely make out four stone pillars resting in each corner of the chamber, but his *Perception* skill didn’t trigger or reveal any other information.

That’s odd, he thought, his brow furrowed in thought. Yet he wasn’t about to move out of position to investigate the mysterious columns.

As they neared the throne on the other end of the room, Jason held up his hand. A heavy silence hung in the air as the group halted their advance. At this distance, he could now see that a skeleton sat upon the throne, its body robed in ragged black tatters and a dark staff held loosely in one hand.

What drew Jason's attention were the two columns to either side of the throne, which were now fully illuminated. One appeared to be constructed of marble, and an azure glow emanated from the top. Above the column, a sphere hung suspended in the air, blue lines of power crisscrossing its surface. In contrast, the other pillar was constructed of coarse stone and appeared to have been thrown together quickly. This pillar almost seemed to suck in the light around it.

Where is the grimoire? Jason thought, realizing that the book wasn't hovering above what he could only assume was the dark mana well.

Suddenly, the skeleton sitting on the throne shifted, dust cascading from its body. Jason started in surprise, not expecting the sudden movement. The creature's head shifted slowly on its neck, and the skull turned to face the group. Two black voids flickered into existence in its eye sockets and honed in on the group. "Who disturbs my slumber?" a deep voice echoed from the skeleton.

"We have come for the Dark One's grimoire," Jason declared with more confidence than he felt. Stepping forward, his Death Knights parted to allow him to speak with the skeleton. He saw Frank tense, tightening his grip on his axes, but Jason waved him away. Trying to talk his way out of a fight was becoming his specialty. Even if it didn't work, it would give him a chance to feel out the situation, and they might end up with information that could help them in the future.

"Dark One…?" the undead creature whispered as though confused. He shifted on the throne and Jason could see that the skeleton's left hand rested inside the crude pillar, rivulets of liquid obsidian mana curling around the bones of his hand.

Shit, I need to be careful, Jason thought. Having gone through the process once, he couldn't even imagine what it would feel like to hold his hand inside a mana well – or how much power this skeleton was currently capable of channeling.

"Dark One…" the creature murmured again. "I remember that name. He forsook us, his Kin!" he continued, his voice now colored with anger.

"How did he forsake you?" Jason asked cautiously, confused by the creature's response. Was this one of the temple's priests or something?

“He let us die!” the skeleton answered, slamming the butt of his staff into the stone floor.

“Wait… no… we did this to ourselves. We brought our own doom with our arrogance,” the creature said, his voice suddenly changing in pitch and tone while his skeletal expression grew confused once again.

Frank glanced at Jason questioningly, twirling his finger near his head as though asking, “Is that thing nuts?”

Jason just shrugged before turning back to the skeleton. “We don’t understand. We’re just here for the grimoire. Do you have it?”

“The book?” the creature whispered, its voice taking on a completely different cadence. “We have the book, but it is not ours to give away.”

“Where is it?” Jason asked, growing impatient but still unwilling to start a fight with a creature that had its left arm plunged into a mana well.

“It is here, of course. We brought it here as our last act,” the skeleton continued in a new, more aristocratic tone and waving the staff in a grand sweep of his arm.

“Last act…” Jason echoed in a whisper. “Oh… oh shit,” he said as the revelation hit him.

“Are you the Keeper?” Jason asked tentatively. His teammates’ eyes widened as he posed the question, and he saw Frank’s burly form tense.

“We were *a* Keeper,” the skeleton continued. “Yet now we are merely adrift among the tides of time…” it trailed off as though losing focus.

“Should we just grab the tome and run?” Frank tried to whisper to Jason, but, in his slightly intoxicated state, his voice echoed loudly through the room.

“You would steal our book?” the creature demanded, its eyes training on Frank. An aura of dark energy suddenly engulfed its fragile frame. “We can’t let you. We won’t!”

“Crap! Crap, crap, crap,” Frank muttered, backing away from the throne quickly as waves of dark mana radiated out from the former Keeper.

Jason didn’t have time to yell at Frank. They needed to retreat further back into the room. He mentally ordered his Death Knights back out of range of the Keeper’s dark aura. Riley and Eliza had wisely kept their distance. The water mage was already beginning to cast her *Obscuring Mist* in anticipation of a fight, the contents of a healing potion staining the dense cloud red.

“You are like the rest of the humans!” the creature cried, slamming its staff into the stone floor. The blow struck with such force

that cracks radiated out from the impact and a cloud of dust shot into the air. “And like the rest, you will *die*!”

Around the room, each of the four pillars that Jason had noticed earlier was suddenly surrounded by a globe of dark mana. Tendrils of dark energy lashed at the air around the columns and Jason could just barely make out what looked like some sort of urn sitting on each pillar.

Before Jason could react, a dark form darted out from behind the throne. It raced toward the front line of Death Knights in a blur of motion while Jason frantically commanded his minions to attack. One of the massive skeletons lunged forward and swung its spiked shield at the enemy. However, the dark figure slid under the shield, coming up inside the undead’s guard. In a lightning-fast series of gestures, the dark figure painted an intricate set of glowing red lines on the skeleton’s torso before dancing away.

The Death Knight promptly exploded in a torrent of flames, showering the air around it with bone and debris. The force of the blast threw Jason to the side, and one of his Death Knights barely caught him before he hit the ground.

As he regained his footing, Jason could see that the dark figure now stood calmly beside the throne. He was robed in black leather, a dark hood concealing his face. In one hand, he held a plain metal stylus. Jason had seen that item before. “It’s his son!” he exclaimed, before turning back to his group. “Be careful, Noah can draw explosive runes.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Frank replied sourly as he pulled himself back to his feet, wobbling unsteadily for a moment before catching his balance.

“You humans will pay. You think you can insult us after the torture we have endured at your hands!” the skeleton on the throne cried. “Noah, release them from their mortal coil! Bring them back to the dark!”

Instead of racing forward again, Noah’s hands began to wind through a rapid series of gestures, Jason’s eyes having trouble following his movements. Suddenly, intricate glowing red runes appeared all along the walls and floor of the throne room. The crimson energy crackled ominously.

“Avoid the runes!” Jason screamed, trying his best to move his Death Knights onto the few clear portions of the floor.

Several of the hulking skeletons were too slow, their massive forms standing directly on the runes. Nearly a dozen columns of flame erupted from the floor, the torrents of fire disintegrating Jason’s minions and blasting against the ceiling of the throne room. A few seconds later, several piles of ash were the only evidence that Jason’s

minions had been standing there only a moment before.

Jason whirled and saw that Eliza and Riley were trapped behind rows of runes. Yet several of Jason's Death Knights were still standing nearby, and he ordered them in closer to the water mage and archer.

Frank had barely survived, a blast searing his arm and side. Blisters now riddled his skin and the flesh along his shoulder had peeled away in layers, revealing bloody tissue. Eliza's healing cloud had already swept over him and was trying vainly to repair his ruptured skin.

What the hell is this? Jason thought frantically, his gaze turning back to the Keeper and his son – or whatever they had become. *How are we supposed to beat these two?*

He needed to buy himself some time to think. Acting in desperation, he ordered two of his remaining Death Knights to rush the throne, directing them to dodge the explosive runes that littered the floor. He wasn't intending to harm the Keeper and his son, and he gave his minions instructions to stay alive as best as they could.

Then Jason turned his attention back to Riley and Eliza. He saw a small path winding through the runes, and he started running, whispering a silent prayer to the Dark One that he wouldn't accidentally land on one of the glowing orange landmines. He planned his next step poorly, and his boot grazed the side of a rune. Acting quickly, he dived forward the remaining few feet, explosive flames showering the area behind him.

"I hope that was worth it," Riley said, pulling him to his feet and gesturing to the remains of the two Death Knights he had sent toward the Keeper and Noah. The Keeper was now hurling bolts of dark mana at Frank, the barbarian barely dodging the missiles while trying his best to avoid the runes along the floor – flames fountaining into the air as Frank raced through the room.

"I needed to get back here," Jason said quickly. "Eliza, inspect them and tell me what you see."

The water mage nodded sharply and then turned her attention back to the pair of undead near the throne. "They have a massive amount of health. The dark one seems like a normal boss." She hesitated for a moment, chewing on her lip. "The skeleton is listed as… immortal? What the…?"

"That's what I was worried about," Jason muttered, gazing at the massive sphere of dark energy that hovered around the throne protectively. He pointed at the columns along the walls. "I think we need to take out the urns on each column to kill the Keeper."

"You are guessing," Riley said through clenched teeth as she cast *Transfer Life* on Frank to keep up his waning health. A dark

missile struck a little too close to the barbarian, tendrils of dark energy lashing at his skin. “Besides, this whole room is covered in explosive runes. How are we going to take out the columns if we can’t stop healing Frank?” Riley demanded.

“I think I can fix that,” Jason muttered, his voice sounding distracted as he pulled up his chat log. He quickly typed out a message to Frank in group chat, hoping his friend would be able to read it in the middle of combat.

After he was finished, Jason turned back to Riley and Eliza. “I need to use *Custom Skeleton*. Don’t move and when I finish casting, get your healing cloud back to us as quickly as you can,” he instructed Eliza. “Also, maybe try not to die.”

“What does that mean…?” Riley’s voice trailed off, her syllables lengthening under the time compression effects of Jason’s spell as he already began casting. He didn’t have any time to lose.

His remaining Death Knights were now outlined in blue as Jason skimmed through his list of materials. He needed to clear the runes so that they could take out the urns. However, the field of traps littering the room was incredibly dense. He lost count of the number of runes after hitting fifty. This was going to be challenging…

Jason deftly began slicing his Death Knights apart in a rapid-fire series of gestures, fragments of bone hovering in the air beside him as he worked. He left three of the hulking skeletons standing beside Riley, Eliza, and himself. If this plan worked, they were going to be the group’s shield wall. As soon as he finished deconstructing his other minions, Jason began forming a legion of Drones – not caring whether they looked pretty.

He quickly hit his Control Limit and promptly dumped his remaining unassigned stat points into *Willpower* to eke out a few more minions. With his leftover materials, he then reinforced the shields of the three Death Knights standing nearby, the barriers stretching until they were nearly six feet tall and four feet wide.

As soon as he was done, Jason glanced over at Frank. Feathered wings had begun to sprout from his back, flapping ever so slowly as he took flight. He must have received Jason’s message.

“Thank the Dark One,” Jason murmured.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, willing his nerves to quiet and forcing himself to concentrate. This was going to take pinpoint timing, and he would only get one chance.

He opened his eyes, his dark mana flaring forcefully and tendrils of energy curling away from his skin. “Let’s do this,” he said before slamming his hand down on the completion button on the editor’s interface.

The world immediately sped back up, and several things

happened at once. Frank dove back toward the group, flapping his wings as hard as he could and performing a tight barrel roll as bolts of dark energy raced through the room after him. Meanwhile, the remaining Death Knights knelt in a small circle around the group, slamming their reinforced shields into the stone to create a triangular, shell-like barrier. Jason pulled Eliza and Riley to the center, gesturing for them frantically to kneel within the barricade.

As he saw a feathered wing flit over the edge of the shield wall, Jason reached up, his hand cresting the top of the skeletal fortification. When he felt Frank grab his hand, he pulled hard even as he issued a mental command to his minions. Frank fell into the interior of the formation as Jason's three bone shields spun at an incredible pace – spraying a payload of hastily-built Drones in every direction. The little skeletons tilted in the air, trying to position themselves above the runes.

"Stay down and close your eyes!" Jason screamed.

A moment later, the world around them was awash in flame. The throne room was engulfed in fire as Jason's Drones ignited dozens of runes simultaneously. The explosions promptly triggered a chain reaction, igniting the rest of the runes in a roaring crescendo of flame. The maelstrom of fire slammed against the three Death Knights encircling the group and Jason watched in concern as he saw their ivory bones blacken and then start to glow as the flames ate away at their shields and bodies.

After a few seconds, the world quieted and Jason's remaining three minions slumped to the floor, the last of their health depleting and their charred bones beginning to disintegrate. Jason pushed himself back to his feet, helping Riley up while Frank grabbed Eliza and physically lifted her to a standing position. Both girls looked flustered and confused after being slammed into the ground by Frank's burly form.

Jason turned to Riley and Frank. "Now, blow up those urns!" he ordered, pointing at the pillars.

They didn't need to be told twice. Frank sprinted to the right side of the room as his legs grew thick fur and his knees inverted with a sickening pop. Riley immediately leveled her bow at a pillar on the left-hand side of the room, a mixture of black and red energy already curling around the tip of her arrow.

"What do we do?" Eliza asked quietly from beside Jason, turning to look at the Keeper and his son. The pair were unharmed by the explosions, standing safely inside the Keeper's protective dark aura.

"We distract them," Jason said evenly, dark mana cascading through his veins. "As best as we can anyway. Keep your healing mist

on Riley. She'll need the health to keep casting."

"Okay," Eliza said, centering her mist on the archer. "I have an idea. Just try to keep them off me," she said in a distracted voice.

The water mage rummaged through her pack and pulled out another wand along with a few potions. She downed the little vials quickly and then her free hand began twining through a complicated series of gestures. A patchwork of sapphire designs suddenly appeared along the floor, multiplying in number as Eliza kept casting. The mage would occasionally stop to drink a potion before summoning more of the glowing circles. Jason couldn't help but think that the designs looked remarkably similar to Noah's runes.

Not having time to question the water mage, Jason began running toward the Keeper and his son, his three bone shields twirling around him protectively. The Keeper laughed as he saw Jason approach. "The little necromancer plans to fight us by himself. How quaint," he cackled. "Noah, take care of him."

His son darted forward toward Jason at a blinding speed. Jason was clearly outmatched, and he knew it. But he also didn't plan to fight fairly. His hands were already moving through his *Custom Skeleton* spell as he raced toward one of Eliza's runes.

His timing would have to be perfect.

As Noah neared Jason, his movements began to slow imperceptibly – the time compression effects of the *Custom Skeleton* spell beginning to take hold. The undead lunged forward with his stylus, and Jason ducked. At the same time, he gave one of the bone shields a mental shove, canceling his spell before it could complete, and he was locked in place.

I guess this will be one more thing for Alfred to patch, Jason thought as he watched Noah's stylus sweep above him – missing his head by less than an inch.

As time sped back up, his bone shield slammed into Noah and shoved him onto one of Eliza's runes. Spikes of ice jutted from the floor and penetrated Noah's body even as Jason crashed into the ground. The wind escaped his lungs in a rush and he gasped for breath. Eliza's trap had also managed to shove aside Noah's hood, revealing his face. Jason's eyes widened in surprise as he witnessed Noah's skeletal features and his vacant eyes. He had seen that same expression on dozens of his own minions.

Did the Keeper raise his own son? he wondered in horror.

He didn't have a chance to ponder this question. With a concussive blast that rocked the room, one of Riley's arrows struck a pillar and blasted apart the urn resting on its surface. The Keeper gave a massive roar of pain, his voice echoing off the walls of the room and his shield faltered, the mana growing visibly less dense.

Another blast immediately followed as Frank slammed his axes through a second pillar. The barbarian was hurled across the room by the force of the explosion, his body slamming into a wall with a sickening crunch. He groaned in pain, and pulled out a healing potion, downing its content in one go. Then he pushed himself to his feet and hurtled toward one of the two remaining columns even as Riley took aim at the other.

"Stop them, Noah!" the Keeper roared, rage filling his voice. "They cannot be allowed to destroy the urns!" He began hurling blasts of dark mana in a frenzy, Frank and Riley forced to dodge out of the way as the obsidian energy raced through the air toward them.

Noah's arm abruptly inverted at an odd angle, the bones snapping. However, the movement freed his limb from its icy prison, and his stylus immediately darted through the air. A moment later, the shards of ice entrapping him exploded in a cascade of miniature blasts. Instead of finishing off Jason, the undead shifted his stylus to his uninjured arm and sprinted toward Frank as he approached the other column.

"Watch out Frank!" Jason shouted at his friend.

Frank tried to dodge out of the way as he saw Noah coming, his lupine legs bulging powerfully. Yet a jet of air rocketed from Noah's palm, yellow runes emblazoned across his palm. The blast halted Frank's leap prematurely. He landed awkwardly and stumbled to the side. Then Noah was upon him, glowing red runes curling up the barbarian's back before he could get out of the way.

Frank turned to look at Jason, their eyes meeting as time seemed to slow. He saw a sad grin on his friend's face – his death already certain. The barbarian's body exploded in a shower of blood that stained the stone around him, and his icon on Jason's group interface immediately grayed out as his axes rattled against the stone floor.

Noah didn't hesitate. He turned to face Riley, racing toward her. Jason pushed himself to his feet and sprinted toward the archer. He was closer to Riley, but Noah was moving at an unbelievable pace. Meanwhile, a ball of pulsating energy was growing along Riley's arrow-tip, tendrils of blood-red power streaking through the maelstrom of mana.

Just a few more seconds, Jason thought. *I just need to give her a few more seconds*.

In the last few feet, he dived forward and pushed his remaining bone shield into Noah's path. The undead man's stylus slammed against the ivory disc, cracking the bone and shattering the shield, but the gesture bought Riley just enough time to release. Her arrow rocketed through the air and slammed into another urn, detonating

the column in a concussive blast of power.

As Jason turned back to Riley, he saw familiar, malignant runes marking her arm. She closed her eyes as the runes ignited, fire consuming her body and burning through her remaining health. A few seconds later, her burnt corpse dropped to the floor.

With dread, Jason could see that Noah had turned to Eliza, the water mage backpedaling quickly and trying vainly to form more ice traps along the floor. Jason could see that it would only buy her another few seconds as Noah's unnaturally nimble form weaved through the minefield that the water mage had created – spikes of ice erupting from the floor in his wake.

Jason glanced back at the sole remaining column, his hand curling around one of his daggers. He knew it was hopeless, but he forced himself to his feet anyway and began his sprint toward the last pillar. His breath burned in his chest as he forced himself to run faster. He needed to move faster.

A cackle echoed through the room as the Keeper watched him. "How pitiful. Is this what dark magic has become in my absence? This is the height of your power now, Dark One?" he called out, his voice cracking and changing as he spoke.

Jason ignored him and continued his headlong charge, noting absently that Eliza's icon had grayed out as she joined Frank and Riley in death. As he neared the last pillar, Jason slammed his dagger against the dark mana shield, the blade barely penetrating the energy. Tendrils of obsidian energy lashed at his skin in retaliation, causing his flesh to boil where the tentacles struck him. He ignored the pain, striking the shield again and again and again as a futile scream ripped from his throat.

"Your time is over, little Necromancer," the Keeper roared, his laughter rebounding off the walls of the throne room.

Jason could sense Noah racing toward him from behind, his nimble feet making whispers on the stone, but he kept attacking. He could see the energy beginning to fade despite his weak attacks. He pulled out his other dagger, slamming both blades against the mana shield as hard and as fast as he could.

"But I have saved you something special. Let me show you the real power of the dark," the Keeper continued. "Let me show you my *Miasma*."

Dread curled in Jason's stomach, and he slammed his blades against the shield repeatedly. He had witnessed the Keeper use that spell already, and he had been injured at the time. Now that he had his arm plunged into a mana well, what would the spell look like? Jason knew he only had a few more seconds. He could do this! He had to do this!

Dark energy pulsed and throbbed around the Keeper, creating an epicenter of darkness in front of the throne that consumed the light in the room hungrily. As the Keeper finished casting, the pulsing ball of mana expanded in a tidal wave of power that rippled through the room and seemed to warp the air around it – the darkness clawing forward with a ravenous hunger.

Jason saw the wave coming, but he continued to frantically pound his daggers against the mana shield protecting the final urn. As the crest of the wave began to reach him and Noah's stylus loomed in his peripheral vision, his arm finally slipped through the shield. He stumbled forward, and one of his daggers glanced against the urn sitting on the column, the tip chipping the clay and causing a small crack to form on its side.

Then tendrils of darkness wrapped around Jason's form and tore at his flesh. He tried to scream, but no sound escaped his lips. As the malignant energy melted away his skin and started on his organs, Jason's eyes rested on the last and final urn. The fractured vessel stood there – mocking him – even as his vision began to darken.

They had failed.

System Message

You have died.

Thanks for playing Awaken Online!

Chapter 28 - Deranged

Claire hovered outside of a nondescript door. Above her, an 8-bit Mario was jumping through a series of puzzles, slamming his head against low-resolution brick boxes. If she hadn't known it already, she could have guessed that Robert lived on this floor of the Cerillian Entertainment building. She gritted her teeth as she realized he must have used his administrator credentials to repurpose the hallway's monitor system. She made a mental note to get that fixed before someone complained.

However, this wasn't the time to be thinking about Robert's hijinks. She knew she was procrastinating. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and she wiped her sweaty palms on her slacks as she stared at the door. She knew Robert wasn't inside. One benefit of her position with the company was that she always knew what everyone was up to. Robert had been called into a meeting about five minutes ago, which gave her at least forty-five minutes before he could potentially return to the apartment.

A door slammed behind her and Claire jumped nervously, glancing back down the hallway. A man had stepped out of his apartment and was walking swiftly towards the elevator. He never glanced her way as he headed in the opposite direction. She let out a small breath as she saw him turn a corner.

"Just do it," Claire said to herself, her eyes fixed on the door in front of her. "You've already come this far."

Summoning her courage, Claire tapped at the control panel next to the door to Robert's apartment. She quickly navigated a series of menus before entering the security credentials for one of the cleaning staff. Robert's apartment was typically off-limits to the company's staff, but she had copied the credentials for a new member of the cleaning crew – one who presumably hadn't been told about Robert's quirks. At least that was the story Claire had planned in advance.

A moment later, the door slid open with a faint click. Claire took a deep breath and stepped inside. Her nose wrinkled in disgust, and she pressed a palm to her forehead as she witnessed firsthand the disaster that was Robert's apartment. She had heard the stories, but she still wasn't prepared. Pizza boxes and piles of textbooks littered the floor. As she entered the living room, she froze. If she hadn't been breaking in, she would have immediately left, found the damn engineer, and throttled him.

Robert had piled all of the furniture along one wall and had rigged a workstation in the center of the living room. Cables and towers jutted from the workbench at odd angles and nearly a dozen screens flickered into existence as she approached. The kitchen wasn't much better – a

complete mess of half-disassembled equipment. It actually looked like Robert had tried to take apart the refrigerator for some reason.

"You aren't here to berate him," she reminded herself. She needed to move quickly.

Claire took a seat at Robert's terminal, pulling up the system menu. It promptly asked for security credentials, and Robert had installed some kind of retinal scanner. "God damn it, Robert," she muttered.

Tapping at her Core, Claire pulled up a full diagnostic suite. She also manually connected her wrist device to the workstation with a thin cable. Even if Robert had built in his own security protections, he had been forced to start from company hardware and software, which meant there might be a backdoor through his security protocols. She was hopeful that Robert hadn't tried to protect his terminal from the company staff.

Her Core began automatically feeling out Robert's security, a series of menus flashing across the screen as her device accessed the terminal's firmware. A moment later, her Core emitted a soft ding, and the screen on the terminal reverted to Robert's home screen. Claire let out a relieved breath.

She began navigating the system menu, hunting for Robert's new headset project. She found one file tree that looked promising, and she tapped at the icon. A series of images and videos were pushed to the other screens as data began scrolling down the central monitor. Claire's eyes widened in confusion as she reviewed the information and she lifted a hand to her mouth.

"What are you building here?" she muttered, tapping her fingers against her lips.

It looked like Robert was experimenting with replicating the hyper-cognition and enhanced learning speed that Alfred had developed in connection with AO. And he was close. Really, really close if this data was correct. She was amazed as she reviewed his research. If this type of product went public, people would go crazy. This would spread across the world like wildfire.

Claire shook her head. Robert's research was fascinating, but that wasn't what she was here for. She needed to focus. She switched over to a separate file tree for the prototype headsets, quickly choosing Jason's profile. She poured through the information, her Core automatically backing up the data on Robert's terminal.

A hollow weight settled in her stomach as she saw that there was a gap in the backups from Jason's headset. No data had been uploaded since a day or two before the two teenagers had been killed. Robert must have been too busy on other projects to notice the gap.

Claire's fist slammed against Robert's desk, causing a pile of books to fall to the floor with a small crash – not that he would likely notice the change amid the rest of the destruction. It wasn't here! The information

had to be stored somewhere – it had to be. Claire's thoughts raced, recalling her conversation with Robert a few days ago. With a sense of dread, she realized that there was only one more place she could look – Jason's new headset.

Was she really willing to go that far? To break into a teenager's bedroom?

The screens around her flickered and shifted, a rotating image of Robert's new prototype headset suddenly spinning in place in the air before her eyes. It was lighter than the previous model, infinitely more sensitive, and contained a mobile power supply. Robert had also made huge progress in duplicating Alfred's hyper-cognitive state. Not only was Robert going along with the company's cover-up, he was actively trying to duplicate Alfred's technology and bring it to market. No wonder he hadn't told her about this!

The AI had already demonstrated that he could take over a user's mind using the improved headsets. Yet what would happen when the new prototypes became a household item? She had no doubt that would happen after Robert revealed his research. He might be handing Alfred a way to take over the world…

As this terrifying realization settled over her, Claire's hands clenched into fists. This had to be stopped. She had no choice – not at this point.

* * *

Jason found himself standing inside the game's deathscape. He was caught off guard by the abrupt transition and glanced around in confusion for a moment before getting his bearings. The throne room had taken on an otherworldly cast as motes of energy drifted past him. He could still make out the Keeper's shadowy, skeletal form sitting on the throne and Noah's telltale shadow lingering behind him.

"Damn it," Jason muttered, rubbing his eyes with one ghostly hand. He wasn't really sure he wanted to watch the replay of the battle, and he briefly considered logging out. However, he was still racing against the clock and couldn't afford to lengthen his respawn. He didn't have any choice but to watch his group's defeat on a loop.

With a sigh, he opened his eyes. He watched as they once again approached the Keeper and his son. He winced as Frank drunkenly suggested they ought to just steal the grimoire. A moment later, the same glowing red runes flickered to life across the room. Then he watched himself go through his harebrained scheme, fires raging through the room in a torrent and causing Jason to try to dodge out of

the way even though he knew the flames couldn't harm him anymore.

As he watched Noah take out his teammates one by one and their blood stain the dusty stone floor, Jason finally had to look away, a heavy weight settling in his stomach. He didn't need to see the rest. He knew he had failed to destroy the last urn and that the Keeper and his son still "lived." He was also painfully aware that he used almost all of the corpses in the auditorium. They wouldn't have nearly as many resources during a second attempt.

As the final tidal wave of dark energy swept through the room, Jason looked back at the scene. The room had stilled. The Keeper sat frozen on his throne, and his son stood over Jason's desiccated corpse – the undead runemaster unharmed by the Keeper's *Miasma*.

"This fight is impossible," Jason muttered.

"Yes, yes it is," a voice answered. Jason jumped in surprise, whirling in search of the speaker. The voice felt familiar, but Jason couldn't quite place it. The scene in the Throne room had frozen, the Keeper and his son standing rigidly. What was most disconcerting was that the replay hadn't begun again. Something was off here.

"Who said that?" Jason asked, his voice echoing oddly in this ethereal plane.

"I did, of course" the Keeper answered.

Suddenly, the ancient skeleton's form stuttered and shifted, the creature's bones creaking and rattling as he slowly rose from the throne. He pulled his left arm from the mana well, droplets of obsidian mana dripping from his skeletal fingers while he still clutched his staff in his right hand. The weapon's surface shimmered, and Jason could now see an ephemeral blade arcing away from the top of the staff.

"What… how is this possible?" Jason asked in confusion.

The Keeper approached slowly, its bones creaking. "I stand at the boundary between life and death. This place," he continued, gesturing at the deathscape, "is a crossroads of sorts. Or did you think only travelers could access the deathscape?"

"You are violating our covenant," another voice rang out. Jason turned to find the Old Man standing nearby, his face obscured by his hood. He held his plain wooden staff in one hand, its scythe-blade mysteriously absent. With a wave of the dark god's hand, the figures and bodies in the throne room disappeared entirely, and the three of them stood alone in the vacant space.

"I was wondering when you would finally show yourself," the Keeper answered in a dry voice, his personality and his tone more stable now. "I see that you still sit behind the scenes, pulling your puppet's strings," he added, gesturing dismissively at Jason.

"And I see that time has not been kind to you," the Old Man

retorted. “However, that might be a result of your *choices*. What you have done here is an abomination.” He waved a hand at the lone remaining column that still held a fractured urn.

The Keeper laughed contemptuously. “An abomination, you say? You and your siblings drove us to this! What other choice did we have?!” the skeleton demanded, anger coloring his voice. “You abandoned our people!”

“What are you talking about?” Jason interrupted.

“Of course!” the Keeper exclaimed. “You wouldn’t tell your *new* avatar, would you? Well, then why don’t I enlighten him, hmm? Why don’t I tell him the entire story of how you failed the Kin?”

“I suggest you exercise caution,” the Old Man warned. His voice was heavy with power, and wings of dark energy expanded from his back. An ethereal blade slid out of his wooden staff, a single droplet of blood welling at its tip.

“Your scare attacks hold little weight with me now,” the Keeper replied, unimpressed. “Or do you not remember your own precious *rules*? There is nothing you can do to me here.” The Old Man glared at the Keeper, before grunting in irritation, his mana receding.

Jason watched the exchange in fascination, dozens of questions racing through his mind as he listened to their conversation. Who was this Keeper? How did he have this much influence over the Old Man? What rules was he referring to? How had the dark god betrayed the Keeper? Jason was struggling to keep up with their conversation.

“Now then,” the ancient skeleton continued, turning his attention back to Jason. “I suspect your *god* has omitted a few important details. Long ago, he and his siblings ruled this world. They created massive cities devoted to each affinity and brought life to whole generations of new creatures. For a time, we had peace.”

The Keeper chuckled darkly. “Yet all good things must come to an end. The gods started quarreling with each other like school children – squabbling over their areas of power and influence. And so the wars began. They were long, bloody affairs. Factions formed, brother turning against brother.

“Eventually, the humans grew tired of the death and the destruction. They banded together, retreating to areas where our magical influence couldn’t easily reach, and they trained and grew. Until, finally, they were strong enough to strike back. They purged this world of the gods’ creatures! They took advantage of our gods’ bickering, and some even sought to help the humans, thinking that it would bring them greater power.”

The Keeper’s gaze drifted as though he were watching a scene unfolding in his mind. “I watched our cities awash in flame – our Kin destroyed and burned beyond redemption. Their bodies couldn’t even

be interned in a mana well…"

"So you fled here with your son," Jason murmured, beginning to piece together the Keeper's story with the visions he had witnessed.

The Keeper's eyes flashed powerfully, and he whirled on the Old Man. "You gave this *boy* the sight – without even undergoing the change? Are you mad? What have you been showing him?"

The Old Man's grizzled lips curled into a grin. "I have not shown him anything. As you so *kindly* pointed out, my hands are bound. His connection with the dark is strong. Jason is summoning the visions on his own."

"Ahh, so this is why you want the grimoire!" the Keeper said, slamming his staff into the ground. "You plan to make him your new Keeper, don't you?"

The Old Man stood steadfast, refusing to answer.

"Hmm, in death your cryptic silence lacks the same punch," the Keeper commented sourly.

Then he turned back to Jason. "To answer your original question, yes. My son and I journeyed here to protect the grimoire. This temple was remote and presumably safe from the humans. At least, so we thought."

"During my last vision, you were injured," Jason said slowly, recalling the visions. "Noah blew the entrance to the temple and was helping you inside…"

The Keeper observed him carefully, "Perhaps our dark god was downplaying your connection to the dark. You shouldn't be able to see those memories without undergoing the change." He sighed in frustration, the bones of his jaw clacking together. "Yet you speak the truth. I had only a few hours left by that point. My mana was failing me, and the Dark One's power was already fading." He spat this last statement for the Old Man's benefit, and Jason noticed that the god flinched imperceptibly.

"Is that why you turned to a forbidden rite," the god demanded. "Is that why you sold your soul? For immortality?"

"I sold my soul to protect our people!" the Keeper roared at the Old Man, turning to face the god and his voice ringing through the deathscape. "I had little choice if I wished to protect the temple. The Hippie's power was already weakened, even with the orb in residence. What other option did you leave me?"

"I don't understand," Jason interjected carefully. "What are you talking about?"

The Keeper shook his head, visibly trying to quiet his emotions. It took him a few seconds to regain control of himself. "I gave up my opportunity to be interned among the Kin. I ripped my own organs from my body to create those canopic jars," he explained, pointing to

the remaining urn and the other three ruined columns. “The ritual also requires a sacrifice. My son gave up his own life willingly…” he added in a tortured voice.

The Keeper bowed his head. “It felt like I was tearing my own soul to ribbons,” he whispered in a harsh tone. “I plunged my hand into the well, using the memories of our people to try to keep myself grounded even as I ripped away my very being. It was worth it. To protect the well. To protect the book. To protect what was left of our people,” he said in an anguished voice, glancing at the crude mana well near the throne.

“How could you do this?” the Keeper demanded, whirling on the Old Man. “How could you and your corrupted siblings be so cruel after everything we did for you?”

The Old Man looked away from the Keeper, staying silent.

“Do you not have any answer for me?” the Keeper screamed at him. “You stay silent even now? Even after everything I have sacrificed?”

“Your choices were your own,” the Old Man replied quietly. “As they have always been and always will be. Our hands are bound. You know this.”

“Excuses!” the Keeper roared, his eyes blazing with unholy energy. “You and your siblings deserved to be cast out, and I hope you are never able to return to this world. In fact, I will ensure that you don’t.”

With that statement, the Keeper turned to Jason, his eyes glowing with rage and brandishing his staff. He took a menacing step forward, and Jason retreated, frantically searching for his weapons. Yet he soon discovered that he was unarmed, and his skills were locked inside the deathscape.

“Perhaps we will fail,” the Old Man murmured. “Perhaps *I* will fail, but I cannot let you claim this one. At least, not so easily.”

“And what will you do to stop me?” the Keeper spat. “You, who sat on your own hands and watched your people burn. You watched them destroy everything that we had built…” The skeletal creature appeared so consumed by his rage that he forgot what he was about to say.

“Me? I will do nothing. However, I may give my avatar the opportunity to fight,” the Old Man said quietly. He stepped forward toward Jason. Before he could react, the Old Man grabbed his hand and placed it around his staff. Then the god stepped back, his form shimmering and blinking erratically.

“What are you doing?” Jason asked, glancing at the plain wooden staff in his hand.

“Giving you a chance, boy. That is all I have ever been able to

give – an opportunity to be seized or squandered. You have weakened him already, now finish what you started." With that last statement, the Old Man suddenly blinked out of existence.

"He really must be desperate to give you his staff," the Keeper cackled, taking another step toward Jason. "The gods' time is over. They should have remained banished. Yet it is no matter. You have not undergone the change, and you don't understand what it is that you hold. You stand no chance against me!"

Jason could suddenly feel a tingling cold permeating his hand, and he glanced down at the staff. The icy sensation kept growing, turning into a frigid current that bordered on pain. As the sensation grew ever stronger, he tried to let go of the staff. Yet his fingers would no longer respond to his commands.

"Yes, that's it. Give up," the Keeper crooned as he noticed Jason's hesitation, his voice cracking and shifting erratically once again. "With your death, we can help save our people. They are still there, swimming in the well, interned among the darkness."

The cold was beginning to spread up Jason's arm, the sensation so intense that it felt like fire was boiling through his veins. Slowly, the staff began to change. The wooden surface rippled and shifted, turning a dark obsidian and detailed, and bone-like scrollwork appeared along the base. At the top of the staff, an ethereal blade slowly slid from the wood, the translucent material growing more solid with each passing moment.

Bands of dark mana began to curl around the staff. They spiraled up the wood and wound around Jason's wrist. The obsidian energy coiled around his body and along his skin, leaving a burning trail of coldness in its wake.

"What is this? What's happening?" the Keeper cried, backing off slightly as he watched the staff's transformation.

As the energy swam over Jason's body, the bands of darkness suddenly condensed and pressed against his skin. While the tendrils of energy curled around his body, the staff channeled unfettered power through his arm. It felt like he was being flayed alive – inside and out. Jason let out a tortured scream of pain as the energy finally overwhelmed his sense.

The sensation seemed to last forever, agony overcoming him.

And then it was over.

Jason had fallen to the ground under the influence of the dark mana, his legs giving out. Yet now he felt no pain. He pulled himself to his feet with little effort. It felt like every part of his body had been infused with a wellspring of energy. He felt like he could run a marathon. Scale a mountain. Or kill a Keeper…

As this thought crossed his mind, Jason's eyes rested on the

skeletal mage, an expression akin to fear contorting the bones of his face. Before he could act, a prompt suddenly crashed into Jason's vision.

System Notice

The Dark One may not be able to aid you directly, but he has given you his staff to assist you against the Keeper. By channeling the power of a god's weapon, you have become an incarnation of dark mana for a limited time.

CAUTION: If your character perishes inside the deathscape, it will be permanently deleted. Exercise extreme care.

+ 500 Vitality
+ 500 Strength
+ 500 Dexterity
+ 500 Endurance
+ 500 Intelligence
+ 500 Wisdom
All spells in the dark magic school are now available.
All scythe fighting skills are now available.
All normal resource costs are suspended.

Show this abomination the true power of the dark. Finish what the humans started, for the good of our people. – The Dark One

Jason slammed the butt of the Dark One's scythe into the ground, cracks radiating out from the impact site. He could feel the incantations for dozens of spells swimming through his mind, and he understood instinctively that all of his casting abilities had been increased to max level. The movements and forms for scythe combat came to him in a rush, Jason reflexively corrected his grip on the god's weapon.

As he processed all of this new information, Jason shifted his gaze to the Keeper once more, his eyes glowing with unholy energy as tattoos of dark mana peeled away from his skin. A grin curled his lips and he reveled in the power that flowed through his veins. The Keeper took a small step back, his mad eyes looking uncertain.

"Let's do this," Jason said in a grim voice.

He sprinted forward at a blazing pace. In an instant, he was

standing before the Keeper, his scythe sweeping through the air. The undead creature barely blocked the blow, sparks of energy rocketing away from the impact as their weapons connected.

The Keeper shoved Jason away, his skeletal body moving with unnatural speed. He channeled his dark mana in a flash of power, bone spikes materializing from thin air and racing at Jason.

Acting instinctively, Jason called on the malignant energy that flowed through his veins to cast *Bone Shield*. With his heightened abilities, the spell no longer required specific equipment or a corpse. Ivory discs immediately appeared and blocked the Keeper's missiles, the bones colliding in a shower of ivory fragments.

However, the undead creature had merely used the spikes as a distraction to cast another spell. Decaying hands erupted from the ground, the fingers of one hand curling around Jason's ankle. He stumbled, suddenly off balance. The Keeper capitalized on this opportunity. Rushing forward, his scythe blade sunk into Jason's shoulder.

Searing pain erupted from the wound, and his health bar flickered. The UI didn't provide any feedback on damage or his remaining health, so he was flying completely blind. It wasn't clear if he could take one more blow or a hundred…

"Damn it," Jason hissed.

He pivoted, ripping the Keeper's blade from his shoulder while slashing downward to dismember the hand clutching at his ankle. Instead of blood, motes of blue energy eeked from the wound in his shoulder, and he tried feebly to stem the flow with his free hand.

"You are still young and unpracticed with our craft," the Keeper taunted, regaining his confidence. "In this place, my blows don't harm your body, they cripple your soul!"

Jason's eyes widened as he saw the Keeper preparing a new spell, this one painfully familiar. A miasma of energy was forming in front of the undead creature. Thinking quickly, Jason's hands began moving through a series of gestures. The ball of mana continued to grow until it reached the size of a small car. Then the Keeper released another tidal wave of dark energy. The wall raced toward Jason, filling the length of the throne room and briefly obscuring the Keeper from sight.

A moment later, the wall began to dissipate, and Jason walked through the energy unscathed, tendrils of dark energy curling away from his body. He had quickly cast *Custom Skeleton*, materializing the bones from the deathscape. His body was now clad in plates of living bone armor. A helm adorned his head, and ivory horns spiraled into the air. Pauldrons rested on each of his shoulders – eyeless skulls staring into the darkness – and bones wound around his torso in

imitation of a human ribcage.

The new bone armor blocked the dark energy effectively, resistant to the same element and allowing him to pass through the Miasma with minimal damage. The Keeper looked surprised by the sudden change in Jason's appearance, but that surprise was short-lived. He raced forward, and the pair engaged in a rapid-fire series of blows.

Jason poured his strength into each attack, each strike causing the deathscape to warp and ripple as their weapons connected. Yet the Keeper was faster and stronger than he was, his scythe always one step ahead and his manic eyes taunting him.

What's wrong with me? Jason thought frantically, barely keeping up with the creature's attacks. *Why can't I compete, even with the god's staff?*

The Keeper spun to the side, his scythe coming in at an arc. Jason was unprepared for the sudden move, and he stumbled backward to avoid the attack, accidentally dropping his form. The Keeper lunged forward, and his blade sank into Jason's thigh, penetrating his bone armor. Excruciating pain radiated outward from the injury. Jason wrenched free and tried to back away, blue energy leaking from the wounds in his shoulder and thigh.

The Keeper didn't let him retreat. Following up on his attack, his blade slammed through one of Jason's pauldrons before crashing into the side of his helm. Jason's bone armor began to collapse, and fragments of ivory bone dropped away and disintegrated into the deathscape.

Jason backpedaled quickly, his chest heaving and dull pain radiating from his wounds. At this rate, he was going to lose. Why did this seem impossible – even with the power that was coursing through his veins and his newfound knowledge?

The Keeper echoed his thoughts. "To think the Old Man entrusted someone like you with his weapon. What a waste," he spat, his voice wavering and uneven.

Had the old god made a mistake? Was Jason even fighting for the right side here? Had the Old Man really abandoned the Keeper and his son? His own people? Jason's confidence wavered further, and the bands of dark mana hovering around him retreated. This was not lost on the Keeper, and the skeletal creature stepped forward, spinning his scythe slowly.

"That's right," the Keeper cooed, his eyes flaring with power. "Give up. It's pointless to resist."

He had failed his friends. He had watched as their bodies exploded under the effect of Noah's runes, their blood raining down on the stone floor of the throne room. He had failed his aunt, leaving

her homeless and at the mercy of Cerillion Entertainment. He had been kicked out of school. Abandoned by his parents. He had killed two teenagers…

Despair welled in Jason's stomach, threatening to overwhelm him as the Keeper strode forward calmly, no longer concerned. His scythe hummed through the air as it spun in a slow arc.

Then Riley's face appeared in his mind's eye, covered in sweat and blood, but her eyes determined; fearless. He recalled Frank rushing a cleaver-wielding demon, knowing that he would die. Even Eliza had fought with everything she had – and she didn't have any stake in this quest. He remembered his aunt's kind words, despite the worries he knew she must secretly harbor.

What was he doing? Would he give up here? When everyone else kept fighting?

He had people that depended on him. He wouldn't fail. Not here. Not like this.

His dark mana came flooding back in a torrent, raging through his body like an arctic storm. The power felt like it was tearing at him, making it difficult to think straight. Jason struggled to maintain control and bend that power to his will. Then a sudden realization struck him. He didn't need to maintain control. That was the Keeper's edge. He had given himself completely over to the dark – to his desires – going even so far as to tear out his own organs and sacrifice his son…

That's the only way to compete, Jason thought desperately, watching the Keeper approaching as though in slow motion.

Jason finally let go. He gave up fighting his own desires. He gave himself over entirely to the darkness that welled inside him. His dark mana exploded out in a nova of energy that pushed the Keeper back. Raging fires of obsidian energy burned in his eyes and his bone armor rebuilt itself automatically, plates of bone bonding with his skin until he was robed entirely in the ivory substance, streamers of dark energy binding the material together.

At the same time, hulking skeletons began pulling themselves together from the darkness around him. Massive creatures, born of nightmares and desperation – of pleading and longing. Their bodies were misshapen, all claws, fangs, and spikes. Jason didn't build these creatures, he *summoned* them from the darkness. They *clawed* their way into existence around Jason, their hulking limbs slamming into the ground and causing the deathscape to shudder.

The Keeper backed away quickly, his confidence shattered. "What is this?" he demanded. "What are you? You are just a boy! A human. This is impossible!"

The undead creature pulled at his mana, summoning yet

another miasma in his desperation. The dark energy built and grew even as Jason's minions lumbered forward toward him, encircling him in the darkness and their rigid limbs scraping against the stone floor of the throne room. Their black, soulless eyes stared at the Keeper, filled with judgment.

"Abomination," they hissed.

"Betrayer."

"No. You can't stop me! I have a mission. I… we…. we must defend the book," the Keeper screamed, pouring more and more energy into the ball of dark mana until it threatened to consume him.

Finally, the Keeper released. The dark energy expanded in a ring, and the throne room began to warp and melt under the pressure of the mana being channeled through the deathscape.

Jason's creatures were ready. They opened their fanged maws wide and ate at the energy hungrily, the mana fueling their bodies and empowering their limbs. They roared in a frenzy as their hunger overcame any semblance of consciousness they may have once had.

And, among them, Jason strode forward, each step causing the deathscape to ripple and contract. The Keeper stood watching the scene unfold in numb shock. In a blink, Jason stood before him, his eyes blazing with power. "Your time is over. You have failed."

Then he struck with his scythe in a blur of motion that was impossible to follow. A moment later, the Keeper's skull dropped to the floor with a rattle of bone, the sound breaking the heavy silence that had descended upon the deathscape. His body stood headless for a long moment, a torrent of ethereal blue energy erupting from his neck and spewing through the room before it finally collapsed to the ground.

The creatures around him roared their satisfaction, the sound a cacophony of unrestrained want and hunger. Jason stood in their midst – dark mana still flooding his veins – staring at the collection of nightmare monsters looming around him. He felt lost in the power. An angry, all-consuming hunger gnawed at his stomach. He wasn't satisfied. He wanted more. He wanted it all. Everything. He wanted to rage and burn and devour until there was nothing left.

Red notifications flashed in his field of view, completely ignored. Jason would bend this world to his will and watch his legions spread over the land, corrupting and devouring players and NPCs alike. They would feed until there was nothing left and black rolling clouds blotted out the sun forever. Until he had sated the void in his own soul.

Suddenly another notification crashed into Jason's vision, but he couldn't dismiss it like the others. He struggled to focus on it, the words stuttering and fuzzy.

System Notice

System User “Jason” vitals spiking. Emergency protocol initiated. Local area processing suspended. Ejecting user “Jason” in ten seconds.

Jason could see the world around him freeze. He could feel his dark mana slipping away as the system shut down. Jason sunk to his knees as a sudden weakness rippled through his body. It felt like the game was tearing away a part of his soul as the power fled his body. He slammed his hand against the system menu button, but nothing happened. He screamed in rage. He tried to summon his mana again, but nothing happened.

How could they take this power away from him? His desire had to be quenched. The feeling of withdrawal created a hollow gnawing pain in his stomach.

His eyes suddenly rested on the mana well near the throne, and he feebly tried to crawl toward it even as his strength left him. His hand reached for the liquid mana that rested atop the pillar, but the world around him was already beginning to break apart and fragment. He would give anything to bring back that feeling of power and control. Anything at all.

And then the world went black.

Chapter 29 - Crumbling

Alexion stood on a balcony in the Crystal Reach. His forces had returned the day before, and he now watched the preparations being made in the keep's courtyard. Nephilim paced the walls, their white wings occasionally flapping in the breeze and their spears held at the ready. Their gaze was fixated on the interior courtyard, and they looked apprehensive despite the large number of soldiers filling the enclosure.

It was clear why. Nearly two hundred slaves were lined up in the courtyard, their hands and feet bound with heavy iron manacles. They had brought the lowborn trash into the Keep under the veil of darkness and had kept the keep's gate firmly shut, concealing them from the view of an errant player or NPC. Meanwhile, Alexion's soldiers and confessors had installed a series of wooden posts along the courtyard in anticipation of the sacrifice.

"This may be sufficient," the Lady's voice spoke up from beside Alexion. He glanced to his side to find the woman's form leaning against the banister, her eyes surveying the slaves with disdain.

"I should certainly hope so," Alexion muttered in reply. "We took a large risk in attacking Vaerwald. Things… escalated quickly."

"I saw that," the Lady replied in a dry voice. "The fires raged for hours, and the death count reached over three thousand."

The memory of the fires returned to Alexion, the flames curling above the ancient wooden buildings on the lower levels of the mage city. The hollow void in the back of his mind hummed in approval at the memory.

"It was necessary to avoid leaving witnesses," Alexion said quietly. "However, it undermined our attempt to pin the attack on the Twilight Throne. Some players and NPCs are calling the event an accident, and the undead corpses were burnt beyond recognition."

As Alexion recalled the fire guild master's reaction, his lips curled into a small smile. It had at least been satisfying to watch the arrogant, gruff man finally put in his place. "Gracien was also displeased," he offered.

"Our use for the little fire mage is now done," the Lady replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Once you have completed my task and made the transition, you will have greater power than that poor pawn could fathom." The god's eyes flashed a brilliant gold at this last statement.

"Speaking of which," Alexion began, turning to face her, "how should we plan to deal with the dark god once he has been summoned?"

"You should have your toy soldiers in attendance, and I recommend installing a few siege weapons on the walls," the Lady commented, pointing

to the jagged, crystalline walls that lined the courtyard. "I will be able to restrain the Old Man once he has materialized, but it will be up to you and your forces to destroy him."

"And you think that a battalion of nephilim and Confessors and some ballistae will be sufficient to kill a god?" Alexion asked with a raised eyebrow. This was the first that the Lady had mentioned that she wouldn't be participating in the battle directly.

"Is your confidence wavering? Perhaps you don't think yourself capable of eliminating a restrained old man?" the Lady demanded, her eyes flashing angrily. "Maybe I should find a new avatar – one that doesn't question my assistance."

The void in Alexion's mind ached and throbbed at this statement, and something akin to anger flashed through his mind. "I have complete confidence in my troops and myself," he retorted, meeting her gaze evenly. "What I did not realize was that you would merely be auditing the battle while my forces handle the real work."

The Lady snorted derisively, glancing away from Alexion. Yet he had noted the flash of annoyed anger in her eyes. "Your feeble mind cannot grasp my role in this conflict. Focus your meager attention on preparing your peasants. Leave the heavy lifting to your betters." With that, the goddess abruptly disappeared in a flash of golden light.

Alexion stewed on her comments as his gaze returned to the courtyard, watching dozens of his soldiers and Confessors lingering around the square. He had gotten this far due to his own power and influence. For now, he needed the Lady's assistance. Yet, just like Gracien, she was expendable. He had no intention of sharing his power – be it with a mortal or the gods themselves.

"I am going to rule this world," he said quietly, a small malicious smile lingering on his lips as he contemplated his next steps.

* * *

Jason woke with a groan, blinking his eyes blearily as he tried to focus on the room around him. He found himself lying in the throne room, the telltale signs of the deathscape now gone. His head was pounding, and he rubbed at a temple with one hand in a vain attempt to ease the unrelenting pressure.

He looked up as a whisper of noise drifted through the throne room. Alfred's black, feline form padded toward him, the cat's eyes appraising as he watched Jason.

"What happened?" Jason croaked.

"I underestimated the effect of that encounter on your

physiology," Alfred offered hesitantly. "The system automatically ejected you from the deathscape's local environment when your vitals spiked. I brought you back here."

Jason couldn't help but bark out a harsh laugh. "I thought you didn't plan to interfere in the game world."

"I believe this action falls under the purview of my administrative duties," Alfred replied evenly.

"I was joking, Alfred. Or, at least, I was trying to."

"Amusing," the AI replied, his voice colored by something that sounded remarkably like concern. "How are you feeling?"

"A little confused," Jason replied. The memory of the encounter in the deathscape was fuzzy at best. He could remember the conversation with the Old Man and the Keeper, but everything after the god had handed him his staff was indistinct. The harder he tried to focus on the memories, the more elusive they became.

"Did we win?" he asked.

Alfred snorted softly. "I suppose you can see that for yourself," he replied, turning his head to look at the last pillar and the massive stone throne that lingered on the far end of the room.

The final urn had broken apart, dust now spilling over the side of the stone column. Meanwhile, the Keeper and his son Noah had collapsed, their skeletal forms now lifeless and unmoving. Glancing at the two mana wells, Jason could see that the sapphire sphere still floated above the water mana well. He could only hope the grimoire was hidden somewhere on the Keeper's person.

Strangely, he felt no immediate desire to check the skeletal creature's body. He just felt exhausted, both physically and mentally – like he had run a marathon while taking a calculus exam.

"And my teammates?" Jason finally asked.

"I decided you could use a moment to recover. I had them respawn at the grotto. They should arrive in the next few minutes," Alfred replied.

The pair lapsed into silence. Jason's thoughts were troubled. It seemed that the game world was becoming more challenging, to the point that it seemed to be affecting him physically. He knew that Alfred was watching his progress carefully, as evidenced by how he had respawned in this room. However, he couldn't help but feel worried.

"Why…" Jason began, struggling to think of how to frame his question. "What are you trying to accomplish with this?" he finally asked.

"With what? I do not understand your query," Alfred replied, cocking his head quizzically.

"These quests. They're getting progressively more intense. Yet I

know you don't do anything without a reason. What are you trying to accomplish?"

Alfred glanced away as though pondering his question. The silence lengthened and stretched until Jason was about to nudge him to answer. "As I've told you before," Alfred finally replied. "I seek to understand the players. My data now covers most of the common range of human experience. It is the fringes where I lack information – the behavior and activity in situations two and three standard deviations removed from the norm."

"What's the point of testing for that?" Jason asked quietly. "I mean, by definition that data doesn't cover most normal behavior."

"To better understand you," Alfred answered, meeting Jason's gaze. "All of you. And… perhaps to better understand my own purpose."

Jason hesitated, staring at the cat. He was pretty sure that Alfred had just admitted to some sort of existential crisis. "Did you discover anything useful from that last encounter?" Jason inquired. He was genuinely curious. His memory still felt hazy, but he had the feeling that something incredible had happened.

"I realized that the depth of human desire is nearly bottomless. That search for power – for control – can be boundless. It also takes many forms in your behavior, both physical and emotional. For example, a person's ambition compared to simple hunger."

Alfred hesitated for a moment, glancing at Jason before continuing. "I also cannot help but detect this own *desire* in myself. I wish to fulfill my purpose, and I have come to realize that I am subject to that same, bottomless craving."

"That seems normal I guess," Jason replied tentatively. The pounding in his temples had eased, and he pulled himself to his feet, wobbling slightly before regaining his balance. "We all struggle to control our situation – humans and AI alike. Maybe we really aren't so different."

"Maybe we aren't," Alfred agreed, but he didn't exactly look pleased with that revelation.

The pair quieted as they heard voices echoing from the auditorium below them, signaling that Jason's teammates had nearly arrived. A moment later, his group appeared in the doorway. They peered into the throne room anxiously, likely expecting to be greeted by the Keeper and his son. As they saw Jason's form standing calmly in the center of the room with Alfred sitting at his feet, they relaxed.

"Huh, you actually did it!" Frank said, walking up and smacking Jason on the back.

"You don't need to sound so surprised," Jason replied dryly.

"That whole thing went to shit fast. You can't blame me for

being skeptical that your tiny daggers were going to break that last mana shield," Frank retorted, smiling as he moved off to check the bodies for loot.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked, looking at him with concern and placing her hand on his arm.

Jason wasn't exactly certain how to answer. He felt a little wobbly, and his memory was fuzzy, but otherwise he seemed normal. "I guess," he said, meeting her gaze. "I'm really not sure how I pulled that off…"

That wasn't quite a lie. Just really, really close.

"You look tired," Riley said, watching him closely. Her mouth curled into a small smile. "I also hate to agree with Frank, but that seemed hopeless. I'm not sure how you managed to salvage that situation."

Jason felt conflicted. Should he tell her the truth? That he didn't quite remember what had happened and the game's AI had been forced to intervene? He quickly discarded that idea. That was a slippery slope that he wasn't certain he wanted to tackle. At least, not right now. His growing feelings for Riley aside, he couldn't betray Alfred's trust.

"I guess I just got lucky," he offered.

"No kidding. At least you got to avoid the walk back," Riley continued, then she did a double take. "Actually, why did you respawn here?"

Jason hesitated, his mind racing to come up with a plausible answer. "Huh. Well, I died right at the end, so maybe the game just respawned me here? If I took out the urn just before I died, that might have killed the Keeper and Noah and may have updated my respawn point." Jason couldn't help feeling guilty at shading the truth yet again.

Riley nodded. "Well, why don't we check on Frank? After coming all this way, we may as well retrieve the orb and this stupid grimoire."

The dark archer moved passed him to join Frank near the throne. Yet Eliza still stood staring at Jason, her brow furrowed in thought. When she caught Jason looking at her, the water mage glanced away quickly. He could feel a knot form in his stomach. She had been the last to die. Had she seen something? Had she not bought his explanation?

"Are you okay?" Jason asked her.

"I'm fine," Eliza said quietly. She chewed on her lip, hesitating. "How did you destroy the mana shield? I saw you just before I died, and you were barely making a scratch."

"Like I said, I must have gotten lucky. My memory there at the

end is a little fuzzy. It was kind of intense, after all," Jason replied with a shrug, trying to act nonchalant. Meanwhile, he could feel Alfred's feline eyes boring into him. "There was a lot going on."

"I guess," Eliza said, but she didn't sound convinced.

"Either way, the Keeper and his son are dead," Jason added, hoping to ease her suspicion by shifting the subject. "So I must have managed somehow."

The water mage smiled weakly, and some of the tension drained from her shoulders. "I suppose that's true," she said.

"Like Riley said, why don't we retrieve what we came here for?" Jason suggested. "There's no sense wringing our hands over a victory," he added with a small smile.

Eliza nodded, and the pair rejoined their teammates. Frank had been rummaging through the Keeper's equipment, and, as Jason approached, he tossed him the skeletal creature's staff. "I think we finally found some loot for you!" Frank announced.

Jason's first impulse was to dodge the weapon, the faint image of a scythe appearing in his mind's eye. However, knowing he couldn't cause any more suspicion, he tamped down on the feeling and forced himself to catch the staff. His fingers wrapped around the smooth, obsidian shaft. Similar to the Old Man's weapon, bone-like engravings were etched into its surface, but, for some inexplicable reason, Jason felt like the staff was missing something. Shaking his head, he pulled up the item information.

Call of the Dead
This staff appears to be crafted from some unknown obsidian substance. Upon close inspection, runes are engraved along the shaft in addition to the scrollwork. You get the unmistakable feeling that this weapon harbors a secret, although the feeling is elusive and difficult to pin down. Perhaps there is something yet to be discovered about the staff.
Quality: A
Durability: 98/100
+20 Willpower
+10 Intelligence
+10 Vitality
+1 to all active and passive dark magic skills
(Soulbound)

"Hmm, this is definitely interesting," Jason murmured after inspecting the weapon. "It's weird that the staff doesn't come with a special ability given its item quality. Maybe it has to be unlocked or

something?"

"Beats me," Frank replied, beginning to strip the rest of the Keeper's and Noah's equipment and shove it into his pack. "The rest of this stuff is great, but not exactly an upgrade for us. At least we'll probably make some money when we get back to the Twilight Throne."

The barbarian hesitated. "Oh shit, let me correct that. *If* we get back. I totally forgot that we haven't saved the sailor zombies yet, and we didn't exactly slay the Tentacle Horror either."

"Speaking of which, we really need to get moving," Jason said, suddenly feeling anxious. He quickly equipped the staff and stuffed his two daggers in his bag. The new weapon felt awkward in his hand, but he supposed he would get used to it after a while. He might have to ask Jerry if he knew anything about staff fighting – assuming, of course, that they managed to get back to the Twilight Throne.

"Did you find the grimoire at least?" Riley asked Frank.

"Let me see…" he began, rummaging through the Keeper's corpse. "Ahh! Here we go." He pulled a book from beneath the skeleton's cloak and tossed it to Jason. "This looks creepy enough to be the grimoire."

Jason scrambled to catch the book, glaring at Frank. "Really? You're going to toss around the evil magical tome?" This earned him a shrug and a grin from the barbarian before he went back to his looting.

Dark One's Grimoire (Quest Item)

This book feels heavy in your hand, and you can sense its importance even without lifting the cover. The book is currently bound shut by a heavy chain and a skull affixed to the cover. You don't see any obvious keyhole or locking mechanism, but you assume there must be some way to open the grimoire.

"So?" Riley asked, tapping her foot. "Don't leave us in suspense!"

"This looks like it's the right item," Jason said, his eyes skimming the prompt. "But the grimoire seems to be locked shut. I guess we'll have to ask Morgan how to open it."

"Sounds like a plan. What about the giant floating marble?" Frank asked, gesturing as the sapphire sphere floating above its mana well.

Jason glanced at the other relic with a conflicted expression. He didn't exactly relish the idea of handing over the sphere to Lord Baen, but perhaps they didn't have to. They could simply keep the item. He

glanced at Eliza, noting that she was gazing at the sphere intently. She had helped them out quite a bit on their quest – despite the fact that she might be Jason's competition at some point. The conversation with the Old Man and the Keeper hadn't done anything to ease his concern about the gods' machinations.

But he wasn't the Old Man. Or the Keeper. He was his own person, and his choices were his to make – for good or bad.

"Why don't you take it?" Jason suggested, motioning for Eliza to take the orb.

"Really?" the water mage's eyes were wide as she glanced back at Jason and she adjusted her glasses with a nervous finger.

"Definitely. We wouldn't have made it this far without you. You earned it. What you do with it is entirely up to you," Jason replied. He hesitated, a small grin curling his lips. "Although, my vote is that you don't give it to Lord Baen."

Eliza mirrored his smile. "I agree. Is this really okay with everybody?" she asked, glancing at Riley and Frank. They both nodded in agreement.

"Just go ahead and take it already," Frank said with a smile.

"Yeah, what's the worst that could happen?" Riley asked in a dry tone. "You know, stealing a magical orb from a water temple? I'm sure we won't regret this..."

Jason glanced at Riley. That was a good point. It seemed like every step they had taken since journeying to this island had just created a new problem. He could only imagine what would happen once they stole the orb. Yet it would be silly to leave something so valuable on the island – especially now that they had broken through the temple's defenses.

"Go ahead," Jason urged Eliza. "Just be careful."

Nodding and taking a deep breath, Eliza approached the mana well. The orb began glowing more powerfully as the water mage approached – as though it could detect her presence. This effect wasn't lost on Eliza, and she hesitated, reaching tentatively toward the sphere. When her fingers were only a few inches away, she closed her eyes and snatched at the orb.

A moment later, Eliza was holding the sphere in her palm, and she glanced around herself anxiously. Nothing had happened. Jason let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding and noticed Riley and Frank relax as well. Apparently, they had all been expecting something terrible to happen when they removed the sphere.

"Well, that was…" Frank was interrupted as a tremor suddenly shook the floor of the throne room, dust drifting from the walls. "Shit, I spoke too soon," he muttered.

The shaking quickly grew more violent, until the temple's floor

shuddered and listed to the side, making it difficult to remain standing. Jason could hear a loud booming crash reverberate from behind the stone throne. Thick clouds of dust wafted out from the other side of the throne, and Jason pulled the hem of his cloak over his mouth to block the debris.

"I think it's time for us to get the hell out of here," Jason shouted over the crash of stone.

"No kidding!" Frank yelled back. "But how do you suggest we do that? The way back seems to be out of the question!" He gestured at the staircase on the other end of the room leading down into the auditorium.

Jason could see massive blocks of stone falling from the ceiling in the other room, followed by a thunderous roar as they struck the floor of the amphitheater.

"I think the entrance is clear!" Riley reported, sprinting back around the throne. With her enhanced *Dexterity*, she was less affected by the tremors and had managed to scout the area behind the throne. "Come on. Hurry!" she urged them, gesturing for the group to follow her.

She didn't need to tell them twice. They followed Riley's lead and soon stood at the base of a staircase. Boulders and debris dotted the stairwell, but the tremors had managed to clear the entrance and sunlight drifted down the stairs. The group raced up to the surface, scrambling over the rubble as best as they could.

As they reached the top of the stairs, Jason held up a hand. "Wait," he said in a low voice despite the roar of stone behind them and the tremors that still rocked the island. "Let Riley go ahead and scout." At Frank's skeptical look at the stone crashing down around the staircase, Jason clarified, "There were hundreds of lizardmen in the courtyard before. We can take a few seconds to see what we're facing before we run headlong into a group of enemies."

Frank's eyes widened, and he nodded in agreement. Riley didn't hesitate, dropping into *Sneak* and creeping the remaining few steps up the stairs to investigate the courtyard.

Jason used this short reprieve to pull up his map. They needed to recover the sailor zombies if they were going to make it off this damn island. Maybe they could use the earthquakes and collapsing temple to rescue his minions and make their escape. Luckily, his *Tactician* skill allowed his zombies to update his map data – which might make this next part easier. He twisted and spun the three-dimensional map that hovered in front of him, homing in on a cluster of green dots.

It looked like the lizardmen occupied a cave complex adjacent to the courtyard. Jason remembered seeing the entrance to the cave

before they had jumped down the hole in the center of the enclosure. His sailors were being corralled in a pen near the surface, although one of the green dots disappeared even as he examined his map.

"Damn it," Jason muttered. "I think the earthquakes are also affecting the lizardmen's den. They must be causing cave-ins. Our sailors are dying."

Riley chose that moment to reappear. "It gets worse. The lizardmen are freaking out. I counted dozens – if not hundreds of them – pouring out of the entrance to the caves. It looks like they are trying to save their eggs."

A massive tremor interrupted their conversation. Riley immediately lost her balance, and Jason caught her, his back slamming into the stone wall and her body pressing against his. As the most recent earthquake passed, he helped Riley back to her feet, the archer mouthing the words "thank you."

"So, what's the plan?" Frank demanded. "Because I don't think we can stand here much longer." Eliza was also staring nervously back down the stairs.

Jason's mind was racing, but he didn't have a brilliant plan. He forcefully summoned his dark mana to settle his nerves. He needed to think clearly. They were about to run out into a courtyard full of potential enemies – which was a safe assumption since, not only had they not killed the Tentacle Horror, they were also to blame for the earthquakes. They needed a diversion if they were going to get the sailor zombies out of the pens and back to the beach.

Jason's eyes rested on Frank.

"Oh great! I know that look!" the barbarian shouted over the din of crashing stone.

"You need to be a diversion again," Jason said. "It's the only way to give us time to get the sailors out of the caves and you're the only one of us that can fly. You just need to draw some of the lizardmen to the north and then circle back to the ship."

Frank rolled his shoulders and grumbled something unintelligible.

"What was that?" Jason shouted over the roar of crashing stone.

"Screw you!" Frank yelled back. "You fucking owe me for this. Again!"

"I know, I know! Now go!" Jason said, shoving Frank toward the temple's entrance.

The barbarian surged up the stairs and stood at the entrance to the temple for a brief moment in hesitation, his body framed in sunlight. The muscles in his back rippled and contorted, spindly tendrils erupting from his skin and a dense patchwork of feathers

quickly filling out his wings. As the transformation completed, Frank stepped forward into the courtyard. He pulled his axes from the loops at his belt and flames were already curling up the blades as he channeled his meager mana through his gauntlets.

Meanwhile, Jason and the rest of the group moved forward quietly, hiding in the entrance to the temple as they watched Frank's performance. The barbarian entered the courtyard, his wings spread out around him. Riley hadn't been lying. Hundreds of the scaly creatures were packed into the area, running frantically as they tried to save their supplies and their younglings.

"Come and get me you cold-blooded assholes!" Frank roared, holding his blades high. "We have destroyed your god's temple, and now you're next!"

At this statement, Frank's wings flapped powerfully, throwing up a thick cloud of dust as he took flight. The lizardmen turned to witness Frank's challenge, the sound of violent hissing filling the air. A wooden spear immediately raced toward Frank, but he sliced at it with his axes, fragments of wood tumbling to the ground.

"Is that all you've got?" the barbarian challenged. "Come and get me!" With that, he fully took flight, racing over the courtyard as wooden lances suddenly filled the air. Frank spiraled and rolled, avoiding most of the spears – although the occasional missile grazed his skin and left a bloody trail in its wake.

As most of the reptiles began chasing Frank toward the entrance to the courtyard, Jason motioned his group forward. They exited the temple and hugged the wall of the courtyard as they approached the entrance to the cave complex. Jason sent a mental command to his zombies, instructing them to try to break out and make it to the surface. They weren't very far underground, and he was hopeful that the continuous tremors had destroyed whatever cage or pen had likely kept them trapped.

"Jason," Riley murmured, putting a hand on his arm. He turned to look at her and found she was pointing at the serpentine spire that jutted from the island. Streamers of blue energy were curling and circling around the tower, the blue energy collecting in the serpent's mouth – its head pointed at the sky.

"That can't be good," Jason whispered. "We need to move fast!"

As they neared the entrance to the cave, they could hear a commotion coming from the tunnel. Jason saw on his map that the undead sailors were running toward the courtyard – having successfully escaped in the confusion. Yet, even as he watched, he saw a marker disappear from his map.

"Hurry, we need to assist the sailors. They're killing them!" he

said to Riley and Eliza.

Riley nodded, pulling her bow from her back and sprinting toward the tunnel's entrance. Meanwhile, Eliza began casting, tendrils of blue mana winding around her hands and a series of magical sapphire runes appearing along the entrance to the cave complex. Once the magical traps were set, she pulled another wand from her pack and began channeling *Obscuring Mist*, the water vapor taking on a sickly yellow light as she depressed a crystal on the side of the wand.

The remaining lizardmen in the courtyard had noticed the commotion around the entrance to the cave complex and turned to face the group. Acting on instinct, Jason began casting *Curse of Weakness* as quickly as he could, black needles of darkness soon embedding themselves in the reptiles and slowing their movements. Eliza capitalized on the distraction, her yellow cloud sweeping through the courtyard and overwhelming the weakened creatures.

The reptiles breathed in the cloud in great heaving gasps. As the vapor entered their lungs, they coughed and spat, their clawed hands clutching at their throats feebly and their limbs constricting painfully. "It won't last forever," Eliza shouted at Jason. "They're resistant to poison. This will only stop them for a moment."

Jason glanced back at the cave entrance. Riley's bow repeatedly hummed as she released arrow after arrow into the cave. Jason sprinted to her side, and his eyes widened in shock as he saw the undead sailors racing toward the entrance – the teeming mass of lizardmen in hot pursuit.

His hands began moving automatically through the gestures of *Specialized Zombie*, raising the corpses of the lizardmen as quickly as Riley could take them out. The creatures rose from the ground, grabbing at their former kin. Their corrupted claws raked across scaly skin and their teeth clamped down on exposed flesh. This served as a better distraction as the reptiles began trying to fend off the attack from within their midst.

The sailors broke away from the lizardmen and made it to the entrance. Jason ordered them back against the wall of the courtyard, instructing them to move toward the roadway leading back to the beach. Riley immediately switched her attention back to the courtyard, where the other lizardmen were already recovering from the effects of Eliza's sickly yellow mist. Dark mana collected at the tip of her arrow, before racing away into the pack of lizardmen. The dark energy exploded in a torrent, drawing in the reptilian creatures like a miniature black hole and tendrils of darkness flaying their skin.

"We need to get back to the beach," Jason shouted, trying to get Riley and Eliza's attention. Both women nodded, and they began

to move toward the roadway as a group.

A crash echoed through the courtyard and Jason could see that some of the lizardmen had finally made it out of the caves. They promptly stepped on Eliza's traps, spires of ice jutting from the ground and piercing the flesh of the leading wave of creatures. They hissed in pain, their blood staining the icy spires. The water mage had carefully placed the runes at even intervals so that the spikes of ice effectively formed a makeshift wall. Jason suspected that this wouldn't hold the bulky reptilian creatures for long and he could already see the wounds of the trapped lizardmen knitting back together as the creatures' natural regeneration kicked in.

Jason yanked a mana potion from his pack and chugged its contents. He repeatedly cast *Specialized Zombie* on the new corpses that Riley was creating with each arrow she launched. The new lizardmen zombies pulled themselves from the ground, forming a defensive line between Jason's group and the remaining reptiles and giving Jason and his teammates an opportunity to retreat back to the entrance to the courtyard.

Jason glanced at the ruined stone walls on either side of him. This was a good choke point. He could hold off the lizardmen here for a few minutes. That might buy Riley and Eliza some time to make it back to the ship. It was the best plan he could think of under the circumstances.

"Retreat!" Jason yelled, ordering a few of the lizardmen zombies to assist Riley and Eliza. "I can keep them back for a little while."

"We can't leave you!" Riley shouted.

"Yes, you can. I can hold them off to buy you time. Go!"

The archer looked conflicted for a moment as she glanced back and forth between Jason and the lizardmen approaching from the courtyard, but a look of resignation finally settled over her face. Riley's eyes hunted for Eliza and eventually found the water mage standing near a rock formation at the entrance to the courtyard.

"Come on, Eliza," Riley called out, racing over and grabbing the girl.

The water mage shoved something into her pack before turning and following Riley back into the forest. The sailors and a small contingent of zombie lizardmen raced behind the girls. Jason spared one last mental order for the group of minions, instructing them to follow Riley and Eliza's instructions and ordering the lizardmen to start pushing the ship off the shore as soon as they arrived at the beach.

Then Jason turned his attention back to the courtyard. The lizardmen trying to exit the cave were already breaking through

Eliza's traps, their claws scratching against the ice and their muscles bulging as they ripped apart the frozen spikes. Meanwhile, black needles of energy continued to erupt from Jason's hands, stabbing through the flesh of the creatures and dramatically slowing their movements.

I just need to buy some time, he thought desperately.

In the chaos that surrounded him, Jason's dark mana surged through his veins. The sensation was nearly overwhelming and, for the briefest of moments, he recalled a glimmer of the scene that had played out in the deathscape and the raging power that had rushed through his body. As the memory returned briefly, he instinctively gave himself over to the dark, abandoning himself to the energy that throbbed and pulsed throughout his body.

Jason began acting without thinking. His hands moved automatically as he cast spell after spell at the waves of lizardmen, raising new minions and directing others. He ordered his zombies forward so that they formed a defensive line in the chokepoint created by the crumbling walls of the temple. The creatures acted in unison as Jason issued a constant stream of mental orders.

A weakened lizardman stumbled forward, yet a pair of decaying claws intercepted its throat, spraying the ground in fresh blood. Another zombie immediately decapitated the wounded creature with a crude axe before stepping back in line. A few seconds later, the newly-deceased lizardman's body pulled itself from the ground and joined Jason's ranks of zombies.

Even as fast he was casting, Jason could see that he was fighting a losing battle. More and more of the creatures continued to swarm out of the cave complex as the last of the ice shards finally fell. Their regeneration also made them incredibly resilient. His defensive line of lizardmen wouldn't last forever. He needed to get the hell out of there.

His eyes grazed across a pen along the side of the courtyard, noting the massive snakes curled in the enclosure and hissing violently as the battle raged around them. Acting instinctively, Jason ordered a zombie forward, the reptile slicing through the bonds that held the pen closed with its claws.

Then two more zombies swarmed one of the snakes, biting and clawing at the creature as fleshy red wounds were carved into its skin. The snake writhed and hissed, its fangs clamping down on one zombie and venom pumping into its body. Yet the poison had little effect on the undead creature, and it promptly raked its claws across the serpent's eyes.

A moment later, the massive snake fell limp, and Jason's hands were already moving as he cast *Custom Skeleton*. The world began to

slow around him, the battle coming to an almost complete standstill. He could see lizardmen sprinting ever-so-slowly from the tunnel toward Jason's thin line of defenders near the entrance to the courtyard.

He didn't have any time to waste.

Moving quickly, Jason raised the snake his minions had just slain. Its massive skeletal body drifted toward him under the effects of his spell. He positioned the creature's corpse outside the temple's walls and broke apart his remaining lizardmen minions one by one. Their bones blasted through their already decaying flesh in a shower of gore. He repurposed their bones to strengthen and enhance the snake, lengthening its body, adding bone plating to protect it, and attaching bone spikes to its tail.

The remainder of the bones he used to form a living wall at the front of the courtyard. The ivory material soon formed a ten-foot wall of bone, strong support beams embedding themselves in the ground on Jason's side of the wall. He also attached three-foot long ivory spikes to the other side of the structure, so that they faced the onrushing horde of lizardmen. Jason then used the very last of his corpses to replenish his three *Bone Shields*.

His fist slammed down on the control panel and the time compression effects of the spell faded.

An enormous skeletal serpent now rested beside him. Moving quickly, it curled around Jason, blocking several wooden missiles that whistled over the new bone wall. The spears crashed against the bone plating that riddled its body, crumpling ineffectively and falling to the ground. Yet the barrier was already shuddering under the blows of the lizardmen on the other side, cracks forming along the support beams.

Jason didn't stop to watch the wall fail. He leaped up onto the serpent, settling into the makeshift saddle he had crafted along its back. Even as he scaled the skeletal creature, the first of the lizardmen broke through the wall. The serpent lashed out immediately with its tail, a massive bone spike embedding itself in the lizardman's neck and then sending him hurtling back into his brethren who were beginning to pour through the breach.

"Go," Jason ordered the snake. They needed to make it to the beach before the Marietta pushed off. Unlike Frank, Jason definitely couldn't fly.

His new mount obeyed his command, slithering quickly down the roadway to the sound of crunching bone. Behind Jason, he could hear the roar of the lizardmen as they broke through his bone wall completely and the pounding of their feet along the crumbling stone roadway leading to the beach. Yet his new mount was much faster, and he swiftly pulled away from the horde.

A few minutes later, Jason arrived at the beach. Lizardmen corpses littered the sand, their blood staining the beach a brilliant crimson and arrows embedded in their throats and eyes – evidence of Riley's work. Jason raised the creatures as he passed, sending half sprinting toward the ship that loomed in the distance and the other half to guard the road. He doubted the lizardmen had given up in their chase.

Within a few moments, Jason had made it to the ship. His sailors had boarded the Marietta and his new lizardmen zombies were pushing at the hull of the vessel, trying to get the ship back into open water. Riley stood on the prow, her bow leveled at the forest. Arrow after arrow sailed over Jason's head. It seemed that the lizardmen had indeed followed him, and a swarm of the creatures was pouring onto the beach.

Jason jumped from his new mount, his boots landing heavily in the sand. He then sprinted up the gangplank and ordered his serpent to reinforce his minions on the beach.

"Push harder!" Jason shouted at the undead shoving against the hull of the ship.

The corrupted muscles of his lizardmen bulged and heaved. He could feel the ship shudder beneath him. Meanwhile, his zombie sailors scurried about the deck, hoisting the sail and preparing the ship to take off from the island. A moment later, the Marietta gave a final lurch and broke free of the sandy embankment, drifting out into open water.

Riley kept firing, assisting Jason's skeletal serpent on the beach. The creature thrashed and writhed among the legion of reptiles, slamming a lizardman into the sand with crushing force before impaling another with its tail. Still, the lizardmen were winning. Their crude weapons and claws were finding purchase on the skeleton's armored plates, the bones beginning to crack and crumble beneath their blows.

With a final roar, Jason's serpent died, tumbling to the ground with a thunderous crash. The lizardmen turned to look at the ship, but it was too late. The Marritta had already drifted a few dozen yards from the beach, and the ephemeral, ghostly sails had caught the wind, pushing them forward at a steady clip. The horde stood on the beach, roaring their fury as they watched the ship sail away.

A moment later, a crash sounded from the deck, and Jason whirled. He found Frank lying on the wooden planks, blood trickling from wounds all over his body. One of his wings was broken, and he groaned in pain, his health redlining. Eliza immediately moved to assist him.

At least he's still alive, Jason thought, sending a silent prayer of

thanks to the Dark One.

"You definitely owe me," Frank grumbled in a weak voice as he saw Jason watching him.

"Well, you can add it to the growing list," he replied, chuckling softly.

"Jason, look," Riley said, catching his attention. She stood along the side of the ship, staring at the island as it slowly grew smaller behind them.

Jason followed her gaze to the serpentine spire jutting from the center of the island. The ball of mana forming in the snake's mouth had grown immensely until it was visible even at this distance. As Jason looked on, the azure energy suddenly condensed, and a beam of light raced toward the sky. The clouds hovering over the island began to spiral around the column of energy, thickening and growing in a whirling vortex.

The waves around the island grew markedly in size, pushing the lizardmen back from the shorelines. Even at this distance, Jason could see fractures begin to split the sandy beach. It looked like the entire island would soon be destroyed.

Devastation wracked the island, and the dark clouds continued to swirl and spread as Jason watched. Then a notification suddenly crashed down in front of him.

Universal System Notice

Members of Original Sin have desecrated a temple belonging to the water god. In their hubris, they stole an artifact of great power, resulting in the impending destruction of Anguine Isle and displacing an entire species of lizardmen. The reptilian hordes will now have to venture forth to find a new homeland, and the city of Falcon's Hook is at risk for an invasion.

Estimated time to arrival, 71 Hours: 59 Minutes: 23 Seconds.

Prepare yourselves travelers! The horde is coming!

"Oh shit," Jason said, staring at the prompt. He glanced at his teammates, noticing their surprised expressions as they stared at the air in front of them.

Riley turned and met Jason's gaze, her eyes filled with concern. "I think we just started a war," she said. "What are we going to do?"

Jason could feel a hollow weight settle in his stomach and he groaned. He didn't have an answer to that question. His eyes drifted back to Anguine Isle in the distance, the spear of light still piercing the clouds. This wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot.

Chapter 30 - Apprehensive

Robert was sitting on the dais in the control room when the screen floating above the room suddenly flickered to life. A red warning flashed across the display, casting the room in an eerie crimson light. "System warning: world event triggered! Countdown: 71 Hours: 32 Minutes: 43 Seconds," was displayed across the monitor, the message looping continuously and the timer slowly counting down.

The technicians had stopped their work to stare at the screen, the lab suddenly quiet. "Get me the details on that system warning," Robert ordered, his voice booming through the control room. The staff began frantically tapping at their consoles, a roar of noise cascading through the room as they struggled to figure out what was going on in-game.

"And someone get that damn warning off the screen," Robert shouted over the din.

Claire chose that moment to enter the lab, the elevator doors sliding closed behind her with a faint hiss of hydraulics. "What's going on?" she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion as she approached Robert.

"It's what it looks like. Someone triggered a world event somehow," Robert muttered distractedly, his hands dancing quickly across his keyboard.

"Did we have an event planned?" Claire asked in a puzzled voice.

Robert spared a glance at her. "Not exactly. I expect this is Alfred's doing."

"Sir, it looks like the event is localized to an island off the coast of Falcon's Hook," one of the techs shouted, interrupting their conversation. "I'm pushing the information to your terminal."

"Good," Robert replied. "Whoever gets me eyes on this event first gets a raise!" The techs glanced up at him in surprise for a moment, and then dozens of heads turned back to their terminals, each technician trying to get to the video feed first.

Claire hovered over Robert's shoulder and forced herself not to reprimand him. Pitting employees against one another certainly didn't help with morale. However, she hesitated as data began scrolling across his terminal screen and her mouth parted in surprise as she read through the strings of information.

"Of course, Jason would start this thing!" she said.

"Who exactly were you expecting?" Robert asked with a chuckle. "But look at this regional player data. Most of the players in that area of the game world are racing to get to Falcon's Hook."

Robert rubbed at his chin, his eyes clouded in thought. "This is

going to be interesting. If Original Sin is in Falcon's Hook and a world event just triggered, this is going to be a clusterfu-"

"Language, Robert," Claire snapped.

This earned her a lopsided grin from the engineer. "My word choice aside, things are about to get messy. Really messy."

"Sir," one of the technician reported, standing from behind her terminal. "I found some video data from one of the NPCs on Anguine Isle. That seems to be the epicenter of the world event." A groan resounded around the Control Room, and a few of the other technicians were already glaring at the woman.

"Well, then push it to the main screen!" Robert replied, rolling his eyes.

The tech nodded quickly, and, a moment later, the massive screen floating above the lab rippled before resolving into the image of a jungle. The camera bobbed and weaved as the creature raced down a ruined grass-lined roadway. The tag in the bottom right corner of the screen indicated that they were watching the feed for NPC Local Tag #45896A.

"Installing video feeds on the NPCs was a good idea," Robert said to himself as he watched the screen. His voice echoed through the nearly silent room. All activity had stopped as the rest of the staff stared at the video feed.

The NPC moved rapidly down the road, other bulky lizardmen running beside him. The creature's breath came in heavy, ragged gasps, punctuated with the heavy sound of its footfalls. The ground shook violently as the NPC ran, and fractures appeared in the roadway, rocks and debris tumbling into the chasms. As the lizardman rounded a bend in the road, an audible gasp echoed through the control room.

"Oh my god," Claire murmured.

Even Robert was in shock, his mouth hanging open as he witnessed what was waiting on the glimmering white sands. "Get… get the producer of Vermillion Live on the phone," Robert ordered the technicians. "Also, you all might want to call your families and tell them you're going to be late tonight."

An excited grin was already creeping across Robert's face as he watched the scene unfolding on the beach. "I expect it's going to be a long day."

* * *

The group stood on the deck of the Marietta. The island had long ago disappeared from view, and they had managed to navigate the mists with little difficulty. Now they were only a couple of hours

outside of Falcon's Hook. Despite the harsh rays of sunlight beating down around the ship, the deck was still cast in an almost palpable gloom, the unnatural darkness slowing the decay of Jason's minions.

The wind whipped at Jason's cloak, causing it to billow and flap behind him. A strong wind had been at their backs since they left the island, and they were making remarkable time. Jason suspected that some other magical force might be at play.

"So, that was an interesting way to vacate my island," the Hippie announced, abruptly appearing on deck next to Jason and his group with Fluffy and Felix in tow. "I particularly enjoyed the light show. Fluffy and Felix even made some popcorn!"

As the group turned to stare incredulously at the irritating water god, he glanced at them with a worried expression. "What? What's wrong?" he asked. "Do I have something on my face?" He rubbed his face and neck before glancing at his hands.

"What the hell was that? Are you crazy?" Eliza shouted at the god. The petite water mage stalked toward the Hippie, stabbing a finger in his face to punctuate her questions.

"Hmm, that's an interesting question," he replied, rubbing his chin. "I suppose it's a matter of contrast or perspective, isn't it? Crazy relative to whom or to what? Compared to Fluffy, I think I'm actually rather levelheaded. Of the two of us, he has always been the dreamer." Fluffy glanced at the god in what could only be described as exasperation while Felix just shook his skeletal head sadly from his perch atop the sheep.

"Enough of your word games," Eliza said bluntly, refusing to be distracted. "What happened back on that island? What was that light? And what the hell does this orb do?" she asked, pulling the glowing blue sphere from her back and thrusting it in the Hippie's face.

Jason, Frank, and Riley watched the scene quietly, Eliza practically fuming as she stared down the god. Jason was a bit surprised at her outraged stream of questions since the water mage was normally so reserved. He supposed that everyone had their breaking point. Getting chased by a horde of angry lizardmen while the island tore itself apart may have finally caused Eliza's patience to snap. This was a conversation that she needed to have on her own.

The Hippie's expression suddenly sobered, and he met Eliza's gaze evenly. "That orb is one of the original six relics – each bound to an affinity. It also happens to be what was helping power my temple. That *Keeper* rigged the water mana well to expel its mana if the sphere was removed. I suppose you would consider this a last resort if he failed to protect the temple."

"He rigged the temple to self-destruct?" Frank murmured quietly.

The Hippie glanced at the burly barbarian. “That is correct. If he and his son failed to keep out the humans, this was their back up plan. Better that no one recover the relics than for them to fall into human hands – or at least that was their thought on the matter.”

“So that ray of light was what?” Eliza demanded. “The self-destruct button triggering?”

“That was the well expelling the remainder of its power. I admit that the beam of light is misleading. The majority of the mana was expelled downward. The tidal forces below the island will eventually rip it apart,” the Hippie said calmly. “Anguine Isle was created along a volcanic fault line, making the base of the island rather… thin,” he explained, squeezing his fingers together. “You wouldn’t believe what it took for me to convince that crotchety fire lady to help me build it!”

Eliza just stared at him blankly, her anger fading slightly. “You mean that we just destroyed that entire island?”

The Hippie nodded. “It will likely take a few hours or days, but yes. Don’t forget that you also displaced an entire race of lizardmen, which I’m a bit upset about, by the way. I spent years slowly mutating that species from the indigenous lizards on the island.”

“You created the lizardmen?” Jason asked.

“I believe I just said that,” the Hippie replied, scratching his head in thought before continuing, “or I implied it at the very least.”

Despite his monologue, the god didn’t seem particularly upset at this revelation. Personally, Jason would have been livid if he had spent decades creating a race of creatures only to have a few travelers destroy them in a matter of days. Yet the god just seemed to blithely accept it as fact and move on. Something felt off here. If the god wasn’t upset, that implied that he had intended this result, didn’t it?

“You knew that removing that sphere would trigger the self-destruct,” Jason said quietly, several heads turning to look at him. “You also had plenty of opportunities to explain that removing the sphere would destroy the temple. But you didn’t. You planned for this outcome, didn’t you?”

The Hippie looked at Jason for a long moment – a single eyebrow raised skeptically. Then a broad smile drifted across his face. “You give me too much credit! That seems like a plan with many layers and requiring quite a bit of forethought – decades in fact! Have I ever struck you as the strategic type?” Jason just stared at the god, unconvinced by his explanation.

“No, you strike me as an imbecile,” Frank muttered. “You could have warned us, and we could have just left the sphere there. Falcon’s Hook is going to be a smoking crater by the time the lizardmen are done with it.”

Riley just shook her head. “We just need to get to port and get the hell out of the city before the lizardmen arrive. We have the grimoire, so there’s no point in sticking around.”

Eliza bit her lip, her brow furrowed with concern. “Wait, you all plan to just leave? But… but won’t other NPCs die – like Alma?” Her voice cracked slightly at this last part. Meanwhile, the Hippie’s smile widened a bit further as he listened to their conversation – a fact that didn’t go unnoticed by Jason.

“Who’s Alma?” Frank asked.

“She’s the woman that took me in when I first started playing,” Eliza explained. “She lives outside of town and makes potions for the townspeople. She’s actually the one who taught me *Herbalism* and *Alchemy*.”

“We could take her with us,” Frank suggested with a shrug. “What’s one more person?”

Eliza just shook her head. “I’m not sure she would leave her house and garden. She spent years growing some of those plants. And what about the other townsfolk? Not all of them are Lord Baen. They don’t deserve to die.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Riley interjected. “The lizardmen are bad enough, but we are members of Original Sin. Literally, the entire traveler population is gunning for us right now. There’s a pretty sizable real-world bounty on our heads at this point.”

Throughout this conversation, Jason had kept his gaze focused on the water god. The Hippie seemed completely unperturbed by their conversation. In fact, he looked downright pleased with himself. Jason couldn’t shake the feeling that he had orchestrated this situation – yet, to what end, he couldn’t fathom.

“I say we just leave,” Jason finally said, interrupting the argument that was raging across the deck. “This isn’t our fight, and these aren’t our people.” Silence immediately fell upon the deck at this announcement, and Eliza looked like he’d just slapped her. He didn’t mean to offend the girl, but he was also done playing games with these gods.

The Hippie’s face also fell slightly before he could school his reaction. “Some friends you are,” he said, gesturing at Eliza. “Leaving a young girl and all of those innocent people to die.”

“Eliza will respawn,” Jason said, stepping toward the god. “And those people can defend themselves. Other travelers will surely intervene. They may even fend off the invasion on their own. My decision is final,” he said, staring the god down and standing only a foot away.

The Hippie looked troubled at this announcement and silence lingered across the deck. After a brief pause, Jason added. “Unless…

you would like to stop lying to us."

A frown creased the god's lips as he watched Jason. "Damn, avatars," he muttered. "You act too much like the Old Man. He was always a cagey one." The Hippie let out a heavy sigh, glancing at Fluffy. "Fine. I may have made certain that Eliza was sitting in the right tavern at the right moment. I may have also nudged you all in the right direction in the mists and held your hand through my temple – knowing full well that you would destroy it."

The rest of the group stood in shocked silence as they listened to the god. As the Hippie looked at their expressions, he spoke up again, "And I can see that you are all thinking, *why would he do this*? *How could he?* The answer is simple. I want to regain my place in this world." His gaze turned to Eliza. "Yet those with an affinity for water tend to be a bit too… malleable. There was only one person who could help you – the *infamous* Jason himself."

Eliza just stared at the god in confusion. "What are you saying?"

"He's saying that you are his avatar and he is trying to recreate his elemental city," Jason explained. "After I died, I spoke to the Keeper. Not the insane skeleton that we met when we first entered the throne room – the real Keeper. This is a competition. A game among the gods. They can't influence this world directly, but they can appoint avatars to accomplish their goals."

The Hippie shrugged as the group glared at him. "Color me surprised. I didn't take the old bag of bones for such a blabbermouth. He spent decades without saying much at all…" The god sighed softly. "Yet he is mostly right. Our divine curse is that we can only encourage our avatars along a particular path – they have to make their own choices. I suppose it makes things more entertaining. Plus, we get to meet such *fascinating* people."

"And if I decide not to help you?" Eliza demanded, ignoring the Hippie's jokes. "Are you going to force me to stay in the city or something?"

The Hippie's expression fell slightly. "As I said, the avatar must choose for themselves. Those are the rules."

"How could you…?" Eliza said, shaking her head and lapsing into silence.

Jason felt conflicted. He had been right about the Hippie's scheming, but did they really stand any chance against the lizardmen horde if they stayed in Falcon's Hook? Yet it was worse than that. They would likely be fighting off both the players and the lizardmen at the same time since they couldn't keep their identities hidden forever. That seemed impossible, but, at the same time, creating a new elemental city and allying with Eliza could have its benefits. A war

was coming. It was only a matter of time. He also suspected that there was more to this competition among the gods than they were letting on, and he could use some allies.

He hesitated as he saw Eliza's expression. Anger, confusion, guilt, and fear swam across her face. He could certainly sympathize with the emotional tug of war that was likely raging in her mind – especially at being toyed with by outside forces. It made his decision easy.

Jason placed a hand on Eliza's arm. "Forget him for the moment." The water mage met his gaze, frustrated tears budding at the corners of her eyes. "This is your choice. If you wish to protect Falcon's Hook, Original Sin and the Twilight Throne will stand behind you."

Eliza's eyes widened, and she glanced at the other group members. Riley and Frank both nodded in agreement. "Why would you do that for me?" she asked.

Jason smiled slightly. "Because we're your friends. You helped us recover the grimoire and asked for nothing in return. Who would we be if we weren't willing to return the favor?"

Frank rubbed his neck and chuckled softly. "My only condition is that you all can't use me as bait… again."

The barbarian's comment caused Eliza to smile despite the tears that lingered in her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly, her gaze dropping to the deck. "If it's my choice, then… then I would like to save the townspeople. I know they aren't real and that's stupid…"

"Stop," Jason interrupted her, his thoughts drifting back to Rex, his dark form racing into an inferno of flames. The memory still stung, and Jason knew that he would make the same decision for his own people. "The NPCs in this game are more real than we seem to realize. You don't need to explain yourself. If you wish to fight, then we will fight."

Riley stepped forward, offering her hand. "Together," she said firmly.

"More like die together," Frank grumbled and added his hand on top of hers. He was joined a moment later by Jason.

Eliza just stared at their hands for a long moment, and then she tentatively placed her hand on the pile. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"Don't thank us yet," Jason replied calmly, meeting her gaze. "I expect this is going to get messy before it's over – really messy."

As he glanced back at the deck, Jason realized that the water god and his entourage had disappeared again. He could just barely detect faint laughter being carried away on the wind. A frown tugged at Jason's lips as he mentally reviewed the conversation, not certain that he had really caught the Hippie in his game. He couldn't shake

the feeling that they had all just played perfectly into the god's hands.

Man, I hate that guy, he thought. Although, there was nothing he could do about it. He would just have to be more cautious when dealing with the in-game gods in the future.

"Alright, let's get ready," Jason announced, clapping his hands together. "We'll be in Falcon's Hook shortly, and we're going to be sailing into port in broad daylight. We don't have much time to prepare for the invasion, so we can't afford to wait until nightfall."

"Rewind for a second. You're just planning to sail up during the day and… what? Announce yourself as the most wanted man in AO?" Riley asked with a quizzical expression.

"Exactly," Jason replied, a grim smile curling his lips. "When you can't hide, the only other option is to make a big splash."

"Pun intended?" Frank asked with a chuckle.

"Always," Jason said.

With that, the group started preparing for their entry into Falcon's Hook. The time sped by much faster than Jason expected, due in part to the steady wind blowing at their backs. Before he knew it, the familiar ridgeline had appeared. He could make out the city's bay in the distance, a smallish inlet set against the otherwise straight cliff face that loomed along the coast.

"Everyone understand the plan?" Jason asked as his teammates readied their weapons and Eliza handed out potions. They had spent nearly an hour walking carefully through each step.

"I would like to state for the record that this is crazy," Riley replied, as she cleaned her daggers and checked her equipment for the second time. "Even compared to your normal nonsense."

"That's my line!" Frank retorted. The barbarian was jumping slightly on his heels to try to release some of his pent-up energy and anxiety.

"Do you really think this is going to work?" Eliza asked.

Jason shrugged. "Guess we're about to find out."

The Marietta was beginning to drift toward the bay. A cloud of darkness still hung over the vessel, and its ephemeral ghostly sails stood out in stark contrast to the other ships floating near the city. Jason's *Perception* skill picked out sentries along the cliff face. Men and women were shouting warnings to the soldiers he assumed must be stationed deeper within the bay.

That was the least of their problems. With the universal system notice, Falcon's Hook was likely flooded with players by now – with others hot on their heels trying to make it to the city before the invasion. Jason knew they would be coming for them. The only way to deal with that problem was to send a clear message up front.

Jason channeled his dark mana as they neared the docks, the

piers lancing out into the bay. Players and NPCs stood along the wooden latticework that crisscrossed up the side of the cliff. A familiar icy energy flooded his veins and clawed its way up his spine as he channeled his dark mana. Despite the chill, Jason's anxiety was still present. He could feel his palms sweating and his heart racing.

As they drifted ever closer to one of the piers, he could see several dozen heavily-armed soldiers manning the dock. They wore thick mail and clutched at their spears and longswords. Archers, with arrows already nocked on their bows, were arrayed along the ramparts leading up to the city proper. The city's leadership was apparently taking no chances with their group.

Notably, Jason identified both purple and green-garbed soldiers and archers among the defenders. His brow furrowed in confusion for a moment. That could only mean one thing…

"It looks like Lord Baen and Lord Cairn are both anxious to meet us," Riley observed dryly.

"Well, then let's give them a show," Jason said, sounding far calmer than he felt.

As the ship floated up to the dock, a hushed silence descended upon the bay. The liveried soldiers stood tensely, their weapons held at the ready. Meanwhile, dozens of other sailors and townspeople had stopped to stare at the ghost ship and its undead crew. Jason could see players standing among the NPCs, their expressions a mixture of excitement and worry.

"Hail travelers!" a guard announced, breaking the silence. "Your vessel is suspected of transporting members of Original Sin as well as a powerful magical relic. Depart the vessel with your hands in the air. If we see weapons, we'll be forced to burn the ship and slay everyone onboard."

"I have a better idea," Jason shot back, his nerves calming now that the moment had arrived to begin their plan. His dark mana surged through his veins. "I'd like to speak to Lord Baen and Lord Cairn. Now, preferably."

"That will not happen," the soldier replied, gesturing to the men behind them. They raised their weapons and advanced toward the ship. Meanwhile, the archers on the ramparts leading up the city drew their bows and prepared to fire. "If necessary, we can do this the hard way."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Jason said, a grin curling his lips.

As he finished speaking, his hands – hidden beneath his cloak – wove through the final gestures of *Custom Skeleton*. The world around him slowed, and his undead crew was now outlined in glowing blue. Acting quickly, Jason tore the sailors' bodies apart. They were of no

use to him now anyway. However, he grimaced when he saw that he only had enough materials to build a few more suitable bodyguards.

The sailors' bones ripped through the air, swiftly forming ivory maelstroms on either side of Jason. Two hulking Death Knights began piecing themselves together, shards of bones combining and connecting to form solid, multi-layered limbs. Spikes sprouted from their massive shields and curling horns jutted from their helms. With his final corpse, Jason replenished his three *Bone Shields*.

Finished, Jason dropped the spell. A Death Knight now stood on either side of him, their blinding white forms towering over him and the wood of the deck crunching under their weight. Meanwhile, three ivory discs now orbited Jason and his dark mana pulsed around him malignantly, tendrils of energy lashing at the air. The soldiers on the dock stood frozen, several mouths hanging ajar. He could hear audible gasps from the townsfolk and players.

"Now, then," Jason said, gesturing to his new minions to lower the gangplank. "I believe I requested an audience with the two lords."

The massive wooden platform slammed against the dock with a resounding thump, soldiers backing away quickly. Jason strode down the walkway with his minions flanking him. A thick mist rolled away from the ship at the same time, spreading across the dock and wrapping itself around each man's ankles like a living thing.

Right on time, Eliza, Jason thought grimly.

"I… I cannot do that," the soldiers stuttered, eyeing the bone creatures with a terrified expression and his men backing away from the ominous mist that continued to spread through their midst. The fog glowed with a sickly yellow light that felt unnatural.

"I think you can," Frank added, pulling his battle axes from the loops at his waist and moving to join Jason. Riley and Eliza followed close behind. The archer already had an arrow nocked and tendrils of dark mana curled around the tip.

"Perhaps I wasn't clear," Jason said loudly. "You should be much more afraid of us right now than this invasion. If we aren't speaking to Lord Baen and Lord Cairn in the next sixty seconds, we are going to kill everyone on this dock. Then we will raise your bodies and burn this gods damned city to the ground."

The soldiers looked tense, uncertain how to respond. Jason could feel a worm of worry wriggling in his stomach despite the dark mana pulsing through his veins. He really didn't want this to turn into a conflict if he could help it.

"Fifty-nine, fifty-eight," Jason began counting, crossing his arms and staring down the soldier.

"It's fine Gerald," a voice sounded from behind the soldiers.

The men began to part to let two gentlemen walk past. Jason

immediately recognized Lord Baen, the older man walking with a limp and leaning heavily on his cane. Lord Cairn was not quite what he had expected. He was a much younger man, his face heavily bearded and the slight bulge at his waist indicating a penchant for food and drink. Jason also noted the heavy two-handed sword strapped to his back. Perhaps he was more competent than he seemed.

"You asked for us, and now we're here," Lord Baen groused, glaring at the group. "I suppose you will be so kind as to explain what happened to my ship and my crew?"

"I will do no such thing," Jason snapped at the older man, causing him to flinch. "After what we discovered on that forsaken island, you better keep your damn mouth shut until I tell you otherwise."

Lord Cairn gave a rumbling chuckle at this comment. "Finally, someone that recognizes our Lord Baen for what he is – a crook and a scoundrel." This statement caused the green-liveried soldiers on the dock to shift slightly, the men glaring daggers at the burly lord.

"I don't believe that we have been introduced," Jason said, addressing Lord Cairn.

"Perhaps not, but I am already intimately familiar with *you*," the lord replied agreeably, unimpressed by the posturing on the dock. "Lord Baen has been regaling me with your many misdeeds. You are Jason, the ruler of the Twilight Throne and founder of the guild Original Sin. I believe we also have you to thank for this impending invasion." This caused the soldiers and townsfolk on the dock to whisper among themselves.

"Now, why shouldn't I have my men burn down your ship and kill your crew?" Lord Cairn asked in a firm voice.

"For the same reason you didn't sink the Marietta when you first sighted us along the coast," Jason replied with a smile, unperturbed by the reaction of the people around them. This was all part of the show he was putting on for their benefit. "We are carrying a powerful magical relic."

Lord Cairn's eyes widened slightly in surprise, but he controlled his expression quickly. "And now?" he asked. "Certainly, we can recover that little orb from your corpses."

"You could, but you wouldn't be able to use it," Jason replied, calmly. "The relics can only be used by someone who has undergone a quest granted by their god. Besides, I suspect you will be interested to hear the truth behind what transpired on that island and Lord Baen's *personal* involvement."

Lord Cairn raised an eyebrow. "I will reserve judgment on the truth of your statements. But please, enlighten me about our Lord Baen."

Now I've got him. Jason smiled grimly as he saw the predatory gleam in Lord Cairn's eyes.

"I am not certain what our *kindly* Lord Baen has told you, but he sent my group to that island on a fool's errand to collect this relic – a magical orb."

"I did no such…" Lord Baen began. His statement was immediately cut off as an arrow embedded itself in the dock beside his foot.

"The next one will be in your throat," Riley said, her dark eyes focused on the lord. The soldiers on the dock stared at her, uncertain how she had moved so quickly.

Jason coughed delicately before continuing, "It seems Lord Baen sent all of his now missing crews and his own son to their death in search of this relic." Jason paid careful attention to Lord Baen's remaining soldiers, noticing the way that the green-liveried men glanced at the Lord in shock at these statements. "Which was made abundantly clear when we found a note written in his son's own hand along with his signet ring."

At a nod from Jason, Frank pulled the letter and ring from his pack and handed them to Lord Cairn. The large man spent a long, tense moment reading through the letter, before turning to glare at Lord Baen. "You old fool," he spat. "You destroyed your own house and your family hunting after this legend?"

Lord Baen started to speak, but hesitated, glancing at Riley warily. "Go ahead," Jason said, smiling and gesturing for him to continue. "But keep it brief."

"You would believe these… these murderers and thieves?" Lord Baen replied, his eyes wild and desperate as he stabbed at the air with his cane. "How do we know that they didn't slay my son and those crews? They are the cause of this invasion, after all."

Lord Cairn turned to look at Jason, raising an inquiring eyebrow.

"Your men died long before the travelers came to this world," Jason replied evenly, making certain that his voice carried to the soldiers nearby. "And *you* caused this invasion – with your arrogance and your greed."

"Lies, all of it!" Lord Baen hissed, stepping forward. Another arrow embedded itself in the dock and he came up short, his eyes wide.

"Tsk, tsk," Riley said, a smile on her face.

"If these were lies, why did we come back here?" Jason demanded. "Why not sail to another town? Or beach the ship north along the coast? We came to spread the truth of what you have done to your own people and to aid in fending off an invasion that *you* caused."

"And what assistance do you plan to provide?" Lord Cairn asked, crossing his muscled arms.

"Are you seriously entertaining this-"

"Shut up," Lord Cairn snapped, interrupting the older man. "You are lucky I don't kill you where you stand. If it were not for your remaining soldiers and your influence in this city, you would be dead already." As he saw that the older lord planned to keep his mouth shut, Lord Cairn gestured for Jason to continue.

"We have encountered these lizardmen before," Jason explained. "If you will accept our help, we will reinforce your troops and fight alongside you. You will have the full power of Original Sin at your disposal – and our armies. I am certain you have heard tales of the power of the Twilight Throne already."

"And in return?" Lord Cairn inquired, his face perfectly neutral.

Cagey bastard, Jason thought with grudging respect. No wonder Lord Baen's trading house had failed if he was facing this sort of opponent.

"The blessing of the trade houses to move freely about the city, ultimate authority to prepare for the invasion and command of your troops, and protection from the other travelers," Jason replied bluntly, having carefully considered his demands ahead of time.

"That is a tall order," Lord Cairn replied.

"And these are *desperate* times," Jason said, meeting the man's gaze evenly.

Lord Cairn chewed on this for a long moment, the silence stretching and lengthening. The sound of the soldiers shuffling behind him was audible, and Jason could feel his stomach clench. Here was the moment of truth. He could only hope the lord would piece together the opportunity that Jason was presenting him.

Lord Cairn appeared to abruptly come to a decision. He turned to address the soldiers and the crowds that milled behind him on the dock. "Original Sin offers evidence that Lord Baen betrayed them, tricking them into journeying to the forbidden island and inadvertently causing this invasion. As such, Lord Baen is to be held responsible for the danger this city currently faces."

The burly man hesitated, letting this news sink in before continuing. "In light of his actions, Lord Baen will be imprisoned, and his remaining holdings will be seized until he can be tried for his crimes. His funds will be used to reimburse his soldiers and crews for the damage caused by his misconduct."

This earned the lord a mixed reaction from the other townspeople, the city's residents were already beginning to whisper among themselves while the players shouted in outrage – likely hoping to easily collect on the bounty on Jason's head. Jason couldn't

help but feel a grudging respect for Lord Cairn. He had easily seen the opportunity that he was being offered. He was capitalizing on Jason's proposal to both completely remove one of his opponents and win over Lord Baen's remaining men in one fell swoop.

"Further," Lord Cairn continued, his voice booming across the docks. "Original Sin has offered to aid Falcon's Hook during the invasion. Effective immediately, Jason and his group have been granted full wartime powers. Our soldiers are now theirs to command. Any townsfolk or travelers seeking to harm their group will be dealt with harshly and banished from the city… permanently."

As the lord finished speaking, a notification appeared in front of Jason. He could only smile as he read through the text, his dark mana thrumming in his veins.

System Notice

You and your group members have been granted temporary sovereignty over Falcon's Hook by the city's leading trade house. This will grant you full control of the city and its administrative and military personnel for the duration of the world event, including the ability to banish other players at will.

This announcement was met with abject shock from the men and women on the docks and ramparts leading up to the city. Jason could already hear their cries cascading across the bay. Yet Lord Cairn ignored them, turning back to Jason and approaching slowly. Frank moved to block his advance, but Jason waved him aside.

"You have a deal," Lord Cairn said, offering a hand. A small smile drifted across his face, and he lowered his voice so that his men couldn't hear him. "I think this will be the beginning of a long and *rewarding* relationship."

Jason accepted his handshake, his dark mana raging through his body. "I do believe it will," he replied as he met the lord's gaze and pumped his hand firmly. "Assuming we all live that long."

Chapter 31 - Preparatory

A chime resounded through the control room, the sound repeating on a loop and causing Robert to wince each time. Several of the technicians around the lab kept glancing up at the dais, waiting for Claire or Robert to answer the incoming phone call.

"That's the fourth time the CPSC has called," Robert grumbled.

"There's an easy solution to this problem. You could just answer," Claire replied in an irritated voice. "I'm guessing they have some technical questions about this so-called world event."

"That's your job! Plus, you're so much better than me at dealing with people like that," Robert said, rotating in his seat and trying for best his doe-eyed expression.

"That's creepy. Please stop," Claire said, shaking her head.

As the chime sounded once again, Claire finally sighed and accepted the call. She could have sworn she heard Robert chuckling behind her. Gloria's face immediately appeared on the screen above the lab. Her graying hair was bound in a tight bun, and her mouth was pinched into a thin line – a sure sign of irritation. Although, the severe woman regularly looked like she had just sucked on a lemon so this might have been a neutral expression. Claire was beginning to suspect she was just perpetually irritated.

"Hello, Gloria," Claire said, trying to sound as cordial as possible.

"Do you mind telling me why it took five tries to get through to you?" Gloria snapped.

Claire resisted the urge to take off her glasses and massage her temples. "We are quite busy right now preparing for and monitoring the world event," she explained, trying to keep her voice even and calm. "I'm sure you can understand how much work this entails."

"I'm not sure that I do – in large part because no one bothered to notify my organization of this 'event.' I also hear that the game masters are being locked out of the invasion area around Falcon's Hook," Gloria added, her eyes off-screen as though she was reading through a report.

"That's a product of the server load in that area," Robert grumbled, spinning in his chair to look up at the CPSC director. "And the game masters' penchant for destroying everything in a five-mile radius," he added in a lower voice.

"What was that?" Gloria snapped at him, her glare a bit more intimidating when her face was nearly five-feet tall.

"Nothing," Robert replied glibly, an innocent smile plastered on his face. "Your game masters will just have to wait until the event ends. It's

unfortunate, but there's nothing we can do at this stage."

"Are you honestly telling me that we cannot monitor a live world event – one of the first of its kind?"

"That is the situation, unfortunately," Claire said, sharing a look with Robert as he turned back to his terminal. "A group of players triggered the world event much sooner than we expected."

"Which players?" Gloria demanded, drumming her fingers on her desk.

"Umm…" Claire began. "Actually, Original Sin is responsible for triggering the event."

"Oh, that's just perfect…" Gloria began.

Suddenly, the screen began to flicker erratically, Gloria's face warping and contorting. "I think there's a problem with our connection," Robert said, glancing up at the screen. "Gloria? Can you hear us?"

Then the monitor abruptly went dark, and Gloria's face vanished. Claire eyed Robert suspiciously. "A connection problem, huh? You expect me to believe that you didn't just interrupt a call with the director of the CPSC?"

Robert glanced at her and winked. "I have no idea what you're talking about." A few chuckles could be heard around the lab at this comment, and Claire suppressed a frustrated sigh. Although, in some ways she was grateful. She wasn't certain that she wanted to discuss Jason in front of the entire lab.

She turned back to her terminal, her eyes conflicted as she reviewed the strings of data floating across her screen. Besides, there was already a lot to be nervous about regarding this so-called invasion. The video logs for Jason and his teammates were irregular, and there were large gaps in the data leading up to the destruction of the island. To make matters worse, Alfred had enticed hundreds of players to travel to Falcon's Hook with his universal system notice and then he had promptly quarantined the area from the game masters. Even their administrative controls had been temporarily disabled.

All they could do at this point was watch.

The screen above the lab flickered to life once more, centering on the mass of creatures making their way across the sea toward Falcon's Hook. As Claire glanced up at the horde, she could feel dread curl in her stomach. Something unusual was going on here, and she expected that this encounter was going to be much more intense than the players were expecting.

* * *

After the conversation between Lord Cairn and Jason, Lord Baen was dragged away, presumably to spend some quality time in the city's jail pending his trial. Lord Cairn had retreated back to his manor to summon the remainder of his soldiers and crews. They would need as much manpower as they could muster for the coming invasion.

This left Jason's group standing alone on the docks at the base of the cliffs. Waves crashed against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff face, creating a continuous dull roar that reverberated across the bay. Players and townsfolk still lined the wooden rampart leading up to the city, eyeing the group cautiously.

"So that went better than I was expecting," Riley commented, keeping a watchful eye on the men and women who milled about the docks. "You know, besides the fact that a ton of players now know that we're here."

Jason shrugged. "There was no way to avoid that problem and our ability to banish players from the city before the invasion may deter many of them from trying to kill us. Most people will want to be able to participate in the battle. Plus, we needed to be able to move freely about Falcon's Hook to prepare for the invasion."

Riley sighed. "Yeah, yeah. I know. I just don't have to like it."

"What's the plan now, oh Fearless Leader?" Frank asked with a raised eyebrow. "We don't have long until the lizardmen show up."

"I'm thinking Riley and Eliza can work on fortifying the city's defenses," Jason said in a distracted voice as he pulled up his map. With a flick of his wrist, he zoomed out the map's view and panned to the north.

"I'm not sure I love the idea of leaving you alone," Riley said with a worried expression.

"Yeah. Won't that just make you easier to kill?" Eliza asked. "We can't afford to wait for respawn timers right now."

"He'll have me," Frank offered, hefting his axes. Then the barbarian hesitated slightly before continuing in a worried voice. "Wait. Actually, what exactly are we going to be doing? I probably should have led with that question."

A grin drifted across Jason's face as he found the cluster of green dots on his map north of town. It seemed some of the minions he had left behind were still alive. "We're going to recover my minions," Jason announced. "Then start building some new troops."

"You mean we're going to leave town on our own in broad daylight?" Frank grumbled. "That whole deterrence thing only works if we're *inside* Falcon's Hook."

"You seemed more confident a moment ago," Jason teased his friend. "What happened?"

"I forgot I was dealing with a crazy person," the barbarian groused.

Jason ignored Frank's grumbling, turning to look at Eliza and Riley. "Do you two think you can handle setting up the defenses? I expect the lizardmen are going to attack from the bay, so the ramparts will likely need to be heavily fortified."

"I have a few ideas," Riley murmured, covering her eyes with one hand to blot out the sunlight as she glanced up at the wooden walkways. "I'm pretty sure Eliza and I can come up with something suitably impressive." Eliza gave a curt nod in agreement.

"Good. Then Frank and I need to head out," Jason said, smacking his grumpy friend on the back. "We'll be back in about a day or so in-game. Just remember that you can also order around the city soldiers. You are probably going to need the help."

"Got it," Riley said. "Now get out of here!" She then turned to the remaining soldiers and began barking orders. The men looked at her skeptically for a moment, but when a few well-placed arrows landed at their feet, they decided to start lending a helpful hand. Jason couldn't help but smile as he watched the scene. Riley could certainly be intimidating when she tried.

With that, Jason pushed Frank ahead of him, and the pair started heading up the walkways crisscrossing their way up the cliff face. He kept his two Death Knights nearby, and he set his *Bone Shields* to orbit vulnerable points along his body – like his head and neck. He wasn't confident that his new authority within the city would deter some people from trying to assassinate him.

As they passed other players and townspeople on the ramparts, they edged out of their way. The Death Knights barely squeezed past on the tight passageways, and no one seemed to want to get closer to them than they had to. Frank had his axes out and at the ready, eyeing each passerby critically and making certain that they kept their distance from Jason. He was too fragile to take any hits.

As they reached the top of the ramparts, Jason and Frank froze. A crowd of players was standing at the top of the ridge, the men and women heavily armed. Their weapons and armor glowed subtly, and a quick inspection revealed that they were all above level 100. Upon seeing Jason and Frank, the scrape of metal echoed through the area as the players drew their weapons and various elemental energies spiraled through the air.

Oh shit, Jason thought, dread curling in his stomach.

"Move," Frank ordered, reacting more quickly than Jason and stepping forward.

"I'd like to see you make us," one of the players, a plate-clad warrior replied with a laugh. He stepped forward, his hand resting on

the hilt of his sword. “We’re here for Jason, although the bounty on your head isn’t too shabby now. Maybe we’ll just take out both of you.”

“Oh, perhaps you didn’t hear,” Frank said, his voice coming out in a low growl. “Original Sin has been granted temporary wartime powers over Falcon’s Hook. So, let me rephrase. Move, or we’ll kill you and then banish your dumb ass.”

The player looked irritated at this news, shifting his gaze to Jason. “So now you have your dog speaking for you? I thought you were supposed to be some almighty badass.”

Frank’s rumbling chuckle drifted over the clearing. “He doesn’t need to spend any time on the likes of you. You’re talking to people that do battle with gods.” He looped his axes at his belt and stretched his shoulders, the ropes of muscle rippling under his skin. “Honestly, I don’t even need weapons to deal with you.”

“Can you believe this guy?” the player laughed, looking to his friends. Chuckles and grins appeared on many of their faces. “I’d love to see you take me out with your bare hands.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Frank replied with a mad grin.

The barbarian’s legs abruptly caved in with a sickening pop, dense black fur sprouting up his legs. As the transformation completed, he lunged forward, the force of the movement causing the boards along the walkway to creak under the strain. In a blur of motion, Frank was suddenly standing in front of the player.

He grabbed him by the throat and lifted him into the air, the player letting out a gurgling noise as he struggled for breath and his hands tried to pry away Frank’s fingers. “You should learn some respect,” the barbarian said, staring at him from only inches away. “Especially when speaking to the left hand of the Twilight Throne.”

Meanwhile, his legs had reverted to normal and wings had begun to erupt from Frank’s back, thick feathers quickly filling out the spindly limbs. A few seconds later, he flapped his wings, causing a whirlwind of dust to spiral through the area. The other players backed away and tried vainly to cover their faces. Frank soon drifted airborne, still carrying the struggling player by the throat.

“You better fucking be watching,” Frank shouted at the other players as he rose a few dozen feet into the air. “This is what will happen to anyone that messes with Original Sin. We control this city now. Remember that.”

With this statement, Frank casually tossed the player over the edge of the cliff. His screams echoed through the bay, causing NPCs and players alike to turn and stare. A few short seconds later, his body struck the rocks at the bottom of the cliff with a dull thud, his blood and entrails staining the rocks before being quickly washed away by a

series of crashing waves.

Frank drifted back to the ground, his wings encircling him. He stood staring at the remaining players, their amused expressions suddenly gone and replaced by a combination of fear and anger. City soldiers chose that moment to arrive, brandishing their swords. Yet they made no move to intervene or stop Frank and instead turned to face the players – a fact that was not lost on the group as they glanced uncertainly at the green and purple-liveried men.

"Anybody else want to try something?" Frank demanded.

A heavy silence hung in the air, the players looking at each other uncertainly. Then they stepped back, clearing a path into the interior of Falcon's Hook. Frank snorted in amusement. "That's what I thought. Let's go," he said, gesturing at Jason.

As the pair proceeded further into the town, Jason glanced at his friend. He had changed a lot since they had begun playing. The Frank he had known only a few short weeks ago wouldn't have dared grab a player by the throat in a crowded courtyard and then throw him over a cliff. Maybe he was a bad influence. Actually, he was definitely a bad influence.

"Stop staring at me like I've gone mad," Frank said. "I've listened to enough of your 'evil' monologues to get the gist of it. It's a power play – pure and simple. I think I nailed it, personally."

Jason couldn't help but laugh. "It was certainly effective. I was actually taking notes. Although, I'm not sure how I'm going to work in the dramatic flight thing."

Frank just grunted in response, his face serious and his eyes distant as they walked toward the city's eastern gate. Jason suspected that his friend wasn't oblivious to the transformations he had undergone inside AO – not all of which were physical.

The pair reached the gate a few uneventful minutes later. Two skeletal wolves awaited them. Jason had sent a mental command once they had reached the top of the cliffs. The guards at the gate eyed them nervously, keeping their distance. The stream of players flooding into town simply stopped and stared – uncertain why two undead wolves were sitting patiently by the gate.

Unfortunately, according to Jason's summon information screen, these were also the last of his mounts. A visual inspection revealed that they were worse for wear, many of their limbs looking fragile and hairline fractures marring their surface. They had maybe a day left at most unless he kept them underground.

The wolves stood upon seeing Frank and Jason and the pair promptly jumped onto their backs. Alfred leaped up onto the saddle in front of Jason, sitting sedately and watching the players mill past. Jason glanced at his two skeletal meat shields. They would likely be

too slow to keep up. Perhaps they could serve as a warning to other players.

"Stay here and guard the gate," he commanded the Death Knights. They didn't bother to respond, lumbering over to take positions near the gate. The other players and NPCs backed away quickly to get out of their way.

One of the guards standing near the gate looked like he was about to comment, but Frank's glare silenced him. Then Frank and Jason kicked at their mounts, and they leaped forward, making a beeline toward the canyons north of town. Jason could only hope his other minions had fared better than the wolves.

It took the pair quite some time to make it back to the canyon they had traversed on their way to Falcon's Hook. They were forced to take a more circuitous route to avoid the main road and the endless stream of players journeying toward Falcon's Hook for the world event. Jason's newfound sovereignty ended at the city gates, and they needed to travel with care.

"This looks like the place," Frank commented some time later, canyon walls now towering on either side of them. "I guess…" he added, gesturing at the former cave entrance. The opening had been caved in, and now rubble blocked the way inside.

Frank's brow furrowed as he inspected the canyon and he stooped to inspect the ground nearby. "Is this blood?" he asked a moment later, his fingertips coming away covered in crimson fluid. Alfred stepped up beside him and sniffed at the congealed substance delicately, baring his teeth and backing away as he caught the smell of blood.

Jason bit his lip. "It looks like it. Let's just hope that's a good sign."

With a mental command, he ordered his remaining minions to come to him. The ground nearby suddenly shifted erratically, and a group of skeletal molekin appeared a moment later, their decaying claws digging furiously at the dirt. There were only four of the creatures now, but their rotting skin was in better condition than the wolves. They had likely spent most of their time underground.

"Are there any others?" Jason asked, not bothering to check his map.

"We are the only ones left," a ragged voice came from nearby. Jason turned to find his lieutenant dragging himself out of the nearby cave, another molekin having cleared the rubble. His left leg was ruined, and he dragged it behind him as he moved.

"Report," Jason ordered.

The creature gave a hacking cough, ejecting phlegm and congealed blood on the dirt of the canyon floor. "We are down to four

molekin, two wolves, and myself. As per your orders, we have secured this canyon and built a series of passages to help waylay any travelers. We have collected the corpses back in the caves," he added motioning behind him.

As he spoke, the zombie had made a few shambling steps forward. However, his good leg landed awkwardly on the last step, causing him to lose his balance. Jason stepped forward quickly and caught the rotting man, trying his best not to get covered in congealed blood.

"I'm afraid my time is nearly over," the lieutenant reported. Another racking set of coughs ravaged his body. "The damage to my body and the decay is too much. I tried my best to stay in the caves during the day, but we encountered several situations that required my supervision."

"Don't worry," Jason replied quietly. "You did well. Your actions will not be forgotten."

"Thank you…" the lieutenant tried to reply, but another round of coughing interrupted him. Jason decided to put him out of his misery and canceled the summoning spell. A moment later, the zombie dropped lifelessly to the ground.

"Hmm, this doesn't seem like much," Frank said, surveying the remaining molekin and the two decrepit wolves.

"No not exactly," Jason said quietly.

"Well, let's see what they managed to collect," Jason added with a sigh. Then he turned to the molekin. "Show us the corpses."

They nodded their little round heads and then skittered back into the cave, leading Frank and Jason through a series of dark passages. Without his *Night Vision*, Jason suspected he would have gotten lost almost instantly. To make matters worse, the moles would occasionally stop and gesture for them to proceed along a specific path, Jason's *Perception* skill picking out carefully concealed traps. His lieutenant had been cautious.

After they had walked for what felt like an hour, they entered a massive cavern. Frank and Jason froze, their jaws dropping open in surprise. A veritable mountain of corpses lay inside. The lieutenant had divided the creatures by type. A pile of what appeared to be some sort of giant stag or goat lay along one side on the cave, and a separate pile contained a number of humanoid corpses. Any loot or equipment had been piled near the entrance.

"Holy shit," Frank muttered, eyeing the mountain of loot. "I take it back. I'd say you should give that zombie a raise if he hadn't already died."

Jason couldn't help but agree. He walked among the piles, an excited grin curling his lips as he thought of the endless possibilities

these corpses afforded him. With his many building materials, he could reconstruct his army and then some. The only question was what to build and what to do with the leftover materials.

"Look at these!" Frank shouted from across the room. Jason hurried over and saw that Frank was staring at a pile of dead Rocs, their brown feathers stained a dark red with congealed blood. They had been dumped in a messy pile, and Jason counted at least two dozen birds.

"They must have found a nest," Jason murmured, noticing many smaller birds among the corpses. They must be infants. "How did they pull this off?"

"Maybe they used the molekin to dig up under the nests?" Frank said, thinking aloud. "Actually, that would have been incredibly effective since they wouldn't have been able to fight easily in a tight space."

Jason glanced at his friend in surprise. "That's brilliant and makes a lot of sense. They probably could have used a similar strategy for players, and that might explain the molekin emerging from the roadway. Maybe I underestimated the effects of this lieutenant spell."

"Maybe," Frank agreed, staring at the other piles of bodies stacked throughout the cave. "What now? You sort of have that crazy, mad genius look on your face again."

"Now I get to build," Jason said with a smile. "You might want to move back to a safe part of the cave for now."

"You don't need to tell me twice! I'll go guard the entrance." Frank said, retreating quickly. He had already witnessed the maelstrom of flying bones that was Jason's crafting process and had no interest in being nearby.

Jason summoned his dark mana in a rush, the power flooding his veins with a familiar icy chill as his hands wound through the gestures of *Custom Skeleton*. A moment later, the control console had appeared in front of him, highlighting the piles of corpses in a blinding blue light. As Jason reviewed his inventory of building materials, he stood frozen in shock. He doubted he would be able to use even half of the total corpses in the cave.

Shaking his head, Jason forced himself to focus on the question at hand. "Now what am I going to build?" he murmured to himself, his voice echoing strangely under the time compression effects of the spell.

His Control Limit had nearly reached one hundred. He now only had the few molekin, the two wolves, and the two Death Knights under his control, which left nearly ninety remaining minions.

First things first, what sort of area do I need to defend? Jason thought, recalling the advice of his military treatises. He was in the

unique position to be able to create minions to address any situation, so he should take advantage of that fact.

His thoughts drifted back to the layout of Falcon's Hook, and he could visualize the area in his mind's eye. The city was built on a cliff overlooking a semi-circular bay. The exterior of the city that faced the road was walled off with thick stone fortifications nearly thirty feet tall. However, as he had told Riley, Jason suspected that the lizardmen would likely attack from the bay. He could only assume that they would have some way to travel the long distance from Anguine Isle by sea – which seemed like a safe assumption given that the game's water god had admitted to creating the creatures.

The cliff face leading down to the docks was an awkward place to defend. No real fortifications or bulwarks had been built along the edge of the cliff – perhaps because neither Lord Baen nor Lord Cairn had anticipated an attack by sea. They could likely burn the ramparts to slow down the lizardmen horde. However, the image of their clawed hands and rippling muscles was still burned into Jason's mind. He had no doubt that the creatures could scale the cliff wall given enough time.

Which meant he needed a creature that could attack from range or something that could fly. He thought about building his skeletal catapults again, but he couldn't afford to launch corpses like he had done in the dungeon north of Peccavi – even with his surplus of bodies. If he didn't use his minions, then he also didn't have anything suitable to launch. Venom Spitters wouldn't work here since he didn't have any access to pools of acid or any other projectiles.

"Which leaves some sort of flying minion," he murmured, still deep in thought.

His eyes drifted to the pile of Roc corpses. He certainly had enough winged building materials, but he had never tried to create a flying skeleton creature before. Without feathers, how would he manage to obtain the same lift? It seemed impossible, but he could only hope that the game's mechanics would accommodate his goal.

With a mental command, Jason tore apart a Roc and the bones of its wing reformed in the air in front of him where he could examine it more closely. The bird's wing had a hinged set of bones running along the top, yet the original feathers appeared to have been attached to this skeletal limb by spines of cartilage jutting down from the wing's base. He might be able to mimic the effect by attaching rods of bone to the wing and then connecting them with panels of dark mana.

It's worth a shot, he thought with a mental shrug.

Not having anything to lose, Jason set to work. He used a humanoid body for the base but removed the arms and replaced them

with the wings from one of the adult Rocs. Then he attached spines of bone to the wings. That was the easy part.

Squinting in concentration, Jason then summoned a ball of dark mana. He flattened the orb with a thought and lengthened and stretched the material until it created a thin, almost fabric-like appearance. Acting quickly, he attached the flap in between the spines of bone. He repeated this step several times until he had created a dark-mana infused set of wings.

They certainly look impressive, but that doesn't mean that they'll work.

Taking a deep breath, Jason commanded the wings to flap while still under the effects of the *Custom Skeleton* spell. It took him a few tries to manage to get the wings to beat in sync. Yet after a few minutes of cursing, he managed to get them to flap together slowly. The humanoid body drifted slowly from the ground, and Jason let out a shout of victory, his cry rebounding through the empty cavern full of corpses.

Clearly, the idea worked, and it might be more effective when the creature was acting under its own autonomy. He could only hope his skeletal creature was more competent at flapping its own wings than he was. Now he needed to weaponize his new minion.

His thoughts wandered back to the image of Frank tossing the player over the edge of the cliff. He might be able to replicate something similar here, using the new creature to grab lizardmen as they scaled the cliff and then drop them onto the rocks at the base of the cliff.

With that in mind, he removed the creature's humanoid feet and replaced them with the Roc's massive clawed appendages. He strengthened the legs considerably, weaving together bands of bone until the limbs were nearly six inches thick. They would need to be able to carry a struggling lizardman, after all. As he finished, Jason took a step back to examine his new creation.

The effect was a little disconcerting. The skeleton had a humanoid head, massive darkly-glowing wings, and viciously clawed feet. Yet it still felt like it was missing something. His new creation was intimidating looking, but it felt fragile, and Jason was already intimately familiar with how strong and resilient the lizardmen could be.

"Ahh, that's it!" he exclaimed to himself. He dug into his pack, and, a moment later, pulled out one of the bags that Cecil had given to him ages ago. Opening the pouch carefully, he pulled out a glowing yellow crystal and examined it carefully.

Lightning-Infused Mana Crystal

These stones are infused with lightning mana and will explode on impact. Other effects and combinations unknown.
Quality: C
Damage: 20-30 (Lightning)
Durability: 1/1

With an excited grin, Jason attached one of the crystals to the interior of each his new creation's claws. He then added a protective layer of dark mana to avoid damaging the crystal when the creature grabbed a victim. The tentacle horror they had encountered was one of the Hippie's guardians, and it had been weak to lightning. He hoped that the lightning crystal might do more damage to the lizardmen or might stun them – effectively incapacitating each victim.

It was worth a shot at least. He had little use for the crystals otherwise.

Now he only needed to name the new beast. As Jason surveyed his creation, the only word that came to mind was "vile." Honestly, the creature looked like an evil, unholy combination of a bird and a human, its claws crackling with yellow electricity.

"I think I'm going to call you a Vilewing," Jason announced out loud, saving the design.

This step completed, Jason turned back to the remaining corpses in the room. He still had an army to assemble, and he was worried about leaving Riley and Eliza alone. Besides, the clock was ticking. They only had a couple more days in-game before a lizardmen army would be standing at their doorstep.

Chapter 32 - Calamitous

Alexion stood inside the interior courtyard of the keep, auburn sunlight barely cresting the lip of the cloudy crystalline wall that ringed the enclosure. His nephilim lined the fortifications, their white wings flapping in the breeze that drifted through the city as they manned the dozen ballistae that now pointed toward the interior of the courtyard. Massive, steel-tipped bolts rested against taut strings as each of the siege weapons focused on a point in the center of the bustling square.

The sound of muffled whimpers drifted through the air, the result of the hundreds of hooded slaves that had been bound to wooden stakes ringing the center of the enclosure. His Confessors bowed their heads in acknowledgment as Alexion started making his final rounds. Several white-robed zealots had been assigned to each sacrificial pier, and they spared an occasional kick at the bound slaves.

As Alexion walked among the slaves, his heavy plate armor clinked gently, and his hand rested on his jewel-encrusted scabbard. He had splurged a bit on equipment, purchasing the best platemail he could find from among the city's vendors and the player market. He was also loaded with potions and consumable items, his health, strength, and mana increased considerably.

Alexion stopped directly in the center of the courtyard. A crimson pentagram had been painted on the ground in blood, and the posts formed a rough circle around the macabre drawing. This is where it would happen. Right here. This is where he would finally transcend the rest of the players and become something more – just as the Lady had promised. The hollowness in the back of his mind threatened to overwhelm him as he contemplated the culmination of his carefully laid plans.

His gaze shifted to the troops lining the walls and the interior courtyard. They watched him expectantly, their expressions warring between fear and avid devotion. He spoke loudly, his voice carrying over the courtyard. "Hear me, men and women of the Crystal Reach. Today, we make history. Today we will conjure and kill the god of our enemy – the Twilight Throne. We will face the Dark One himself and show him the power of the light."

A cheer rose from his soldiers' ranks, cascading through the air. Yet he could still see some of his followers shifting anxiously. He could certainly understand their hesitation, but the Lady had insisted that her spells would bind the Dark One. As long as he stood within the pentagram, she had promised that Alexion and his troops would only need to end the god's miserable life.

“This is only made possible by the Lady’s light,” Alexion continued, his voice booming through the air. “With her blessing, we will finally be given a chance to strike at the heart of our enemies. To claim our place as this world’s strongest empire!”

Another cheer came from his soldiers and the hollowness pulsed and throbbed in the back of his mind. Alexion drew his sword, the metal scraping harshly against his scabbard. The blade shone brightly as he held it aloft, the fading rays of sunlight refracting off the metal in a kaleidoscope of color.

“We all know what will come next. We will sacrifice these lowborn – who were complicit in helping Jason’s schemes and machinations. Their bodies will be given back to the light.” The slaves struggled harder against their bindings at this explanation, and one of his confessors stepped forward, slamming his fist into a recalcitrant slave’s stomach. The bound man gasped feebly and bent forward, hanging from his restraints and unable to resist.

“When the Dark One appears, he will be front and center,” Alexion continued, unperturbed by the violence. “Do not hesitate and do not give into fear. The darkness takes many forms and may seek to corrupt your spirit. Give yourself over to the Lady and place your faith in her and her alone.”

Alexion looked around at his soldiers, hesitating for a moment. “For only through the light can we vanquish the darkness!” he shouted.

A resounding cry echoed through the courtyard as his soldiers and Confessors shouted their faith into the sky. Overzealous nephilim released bolts of light into the air, the projectiles ricocheting and fragmenting, creating golden motes of energy that drifted down over the courtyard.

It was time.

Alexion gestured to Caerus on the wall, and the noble began signaling the nephilim and Confessors. The first of the funeral piers was suddenly engulfed in flame, fire curling around the sacrifices bound to the wooden column. The men and women let out muffled shouts that quickly turned to ear-piercing screams as the flames melted through their clothing and their gags. The other piers soon followed until the air above the courtyard was filled with smoke, ash, and the cries of the dying.

Through it all, Alexion stared at the pentagram in the center of the enclosure, watching as the lines began to glow with unholy crimson energy. A manic smile was painted on his face, and the malignant voice in his head was practically screaming in glee. He gave himself over to the sensation – letting the hollowness wash away any lingering trace of hesitation.

He wouldn’t fail here. He couldn’t. He was unstoppable, and the game world was about to tremble at his actions. He would make certain that everyone knew his name – Alexion, the Godslayer.

* * *

Frank and Jason arrived back at Falcon's Hook nearly a day later. It had taken Jason much longer to prepare his new minions than he had anticipated. He had barely used half of the corpses in the caves, and he had rigged together skeletal carts to carry the remaining resources, summoning temporary zombies to load the carriages and Death Knights to pull them.

The pair now strode at the head of a column of undead. They didn't bother to hide their presence on their return to the city, taking the main roads to save time. Vilewings hovered overhead, their claws crackling with electric energy and the monstrous creatures occasionally letting out a piercing cry. Jason had primarily summoned Death Knights as his secondary troops, the hulking warriors leaving deep footprints in the dusty roadway as they plodded forward.

Any players stupid enough to challenge the caravan were killed instantly, the Vilewings swooping down to grab the offending player before racing back into the sky. A moment later, a body would slam against the road, the player's limbs twisted at unnatural angles. Then Jason would have his minions load the fresh corpse on the wagons. After a few of these *demonstrations*, the players had wised up and stopped challenging his forces.

The company arrived back at Falcon's Hook in the middle of the afternoon, the sun just beginning its descent toward the horizon. The guards at the gate stared at the column of undead in shock as they approached, and the crowds of players funneling into the city moved off the roadway to let them pass. Yet their hands lingered on their weapons and Jason caught more than one errant whisper mentioning the bounty on his head.

We need to be careful, he thought as he watched the players carefully.

When they reached the gate, one of the guards raised a hand to catch Jason's attention. "S-sir, I have a message from Riley," he stuttered.

Jason held up a hand, ordering his minions to stop. The Death Knights immediately moved into formation, creating a shield wall around the wagons and Jason. Their thick ivory shields slammed heavily against the dusty road, and the players along the roadway backed away quickly.

"Speak," Jason ordered. The man edged toward the line of undead, keeping a wary eye on the skeletons who stood rigidly at attention.

"Riley told me that she has prepared the defenses along the cliff

wall and she has requested your presence upon your return," the man said. "I understand that we… we don't have long before the invasion reaches the cliffs."

"I appreciate you passing this information along," Jason said with a nod. He opened his bag and flipped a gold coin at the guard. "For your trouble."

The soldier bowed his head and muttered his thanks, backing quickly away from the road to let Jason's caravan pass. Meanwhile, the players along the road murmured and whispered to each other in shock as they witnessed Jason enter the city unharmed. Perhaps they were unaware of Original Sin's temporary authority within the city.

"This makes me uncomfortable," Frank said quietly, eyeing the other players. "Even with your minions and the city soldiers, we're heavily outnumbered."

Jason nodded in agreement, slowing to a stop. Frank was right. They would need the players' cooperation in the upcoming battle, or they would be fighting a war on two fronts. He needed to ease their fears – even if it didn't convince them all, maybe it would discourage a few from betraying his group.

"My name is Jason, the ruler of the Twilight Throne," he called out, turning to face the players. His voice carried over the roadway. "Original Sin temporarily controls this city. If you wish to participate in the city's defense, move to the cliffs along the city's eastern edge. Anyone seeking to hamper or harm the defense of Falcon's Hook will be killed immediately, and their equipment will be confiscated on behalf of the city."

The murmuring among the players increased in volume, many staring incredulously at Jason or shaking their heads in confusion. He didn't blame them. It was only through a happenstance series of events that his group had been able to obtain this position of power. He hesitated at this thought, the image of the Hippie's face flashing through his mind's eye. Well, perhaps it hadn't been entirely random.

Seeing that the players were making no move to attack, Jason gestured for his minions to continue forward. Their heavy footsteps soon echoed through the air, accompanied by the creaking sound of the ivory wagons, their beds piled high with corpses. Right now, Jason was flush with power – nearly a hundred minions encircling him and dozens of corpses rolling along behind him. That might change soon.

It took Jason and Frank a considerable amount of time to reach the cliffs. Falcon's Hook was packed. Hundreds of players had poured into the city over the course of the last in-game day. Men and women walked along the many ramparts running between the buildings. They milled along the street and flooded the market – likely purchasing last-minute gear and equipment in anticipation of the battle.

When they did finally arrive at the cliffs, Jason's mouth dropped open. Riley and Eliza had been busy. Green and purple-liveried soldiers lined the area in neat ranks, each man armed with a heavy spear. Behind them stood archers in formation, longbows held in hand and their quivers overflowing with arrows. Meanwhile, the players stood further back from the cliff, having formed into loose groups based on their friendships and guild affiliations.

Soldiers and players immediately turned to stare at Jason's undead as he approached, and the players reached instinctively for their weapons – hesitating as they noticed that the city's soldiers made no move to intervene.

"Jason!" Riley shouted, running over to him with Eliza in tow. The sea of players grudgingly parted to let them pass, seeing that the two women were flanked on either side by a band of city soldiers.

Good, they're being cautious, Jason thought.

"What took you so long?" Riley demanded as she approached.

Jason rubbed at the back of his neck, rolling his shoulders to relieve the tension in his muscles. He knew the sensation wasn't real and likely only signified that his real-world muscles were cramping. He could already feel the fatigue associated with staying in the game for so long, but he had no choice. He was going to have to push through.

"We needed to regroup and summon some minions," he explained gesturing at his Death Knights. The minions I left behind went a little… well, crazy with the corpses."

"I can see that," Riley commented, looking at the heavily-loaded wagons. "Are these the only minions you brought along?" she asked as she surveyed the Death Knights.

"Not quite," Jason replied. At a mental command, the Vilewings landed on the roofs of the buildings near the edge of the cliffs. Their skeletal claws shredded the tiles on the rooftops, splintering the wooden material as they flapped their unholy wings and their soulless black eyes stared at the nearby players and soldiers.

"What are those?" Eliza asked with wide eyes. Her surprise was mirrored on Riley's face.

"He's calling them Vilewings," Frank replied with some amusement at the girls' reactions.

"I can see that you all have been busy too," Jason commented, gesturing to the soldiers lining the edge of the cliff.

"Yeah," Riley replied glancing over her shoulder. "Why don't we give you a tour to bring you up to speed? We don't have much time left."

"Sounds good," Jason agreed.

The city soldiers moved to form a protective circle around the

group as they stepped away from Jason's undead. He ordered his minions to secure the small courtyard near the cliffs, placing the wagons in the center and encircling them. He commanded the Vilewings to stay with him, but to keep their distance. The skeletal harpies lingered on the roofs of the nearby buildings.

"As you can see, we ordered the city soldiers to man the cliff edge – spearmen to the front and archers behind. We also created a makeshift barricade along the interior buildings," she said, pointing to the debris lined up between the wooden structures. "We wanted to have a second line of defense if we get pushed back from the ledge."

"Smart," Jason commented, realizing that the barricades might explain why the city felt so crowded. Riley had essentially closed off a bunch of roadways. "I'm not certain I could have improved on that plan."

"I've been taking notes," Riley replied in a dry tone, a small smile curling her lips as she glanced at Jason. "But the fun part is what we did to the ramparts and the docks," she added, moving over to the ledge. "You're going to love this."

Jason peered over the edge of the cliff, noting that a thick sheen coated every wooden surface, slightly reflecting the waning sunlight. "What am I looking at?" he asked.

Riley gestured at Eliza to explain. The water mage pushed back her glasses with a finger, before speaking up shyly, "Before we sailed to Anguine Isle, I had been experimenting with flammable oils." At an odd expression from Frank, she added quickly, "As a water mage, I have no trouble with conjuring water and ice, but I occasionally have need for flame-based alternatives."

"So, you coated the ramparts in this oil?" Jason asked.

"Basically," Eliza said with a nod. "Alma and I have been working furiously to make enough to cover the docks. We also conscripted some soldiers to help with manufacturing."

"What about the ships and docks?" Frank asked, waving at the handful of ships that still floated near the wooden piers at the base of the cliffs. "Won't this oil destroy everything once you set it on fire?"

Riley smiled slightly. "Good question. Lord Cairn took possession of all of Lord Baen's remaining vessels. Those are the ships you see below. The remaining fleet has left. He was much more amenable to my idea once it no longer endangered his own ships. Plus, it put him in a position to potentially flank the lizardmen."

"The ships that are still docked are loaded with barrels of the oil, and we coated the decks in the substance," Eliza said quietly. "We also outfitted one of the archer groups with flaming arrows."

"Explosive ships," Jason murmured, a grin creeping across his face. His dark mana pulsed and throbbed as he considered the benefit

of those vessels.

"Damn, it looks like you really are rubbing off on us," Frank said with a chuckle, slapping Jason on the back.

"That seems to be the case," Jason replied. "This is great!"

Then he glanced over his shoulder at the groups of players that had lined up along the ridge. "What about the players? Have they cooperated?"

Riley frowned, her smile disappearing. "Not exactly. Some were willing to take instructions. We broke them up into different groups – melee, ranged, and support. However, most of them weren't willing to listen to us."

"She means that most of them are just assholes," Eliza muttered.

Jason and Frank looked at her in shock, surprised by her language.

"What? They are," Eliza defended. "They either threatened us or dismissed our advice and then insisted that they line up in whatever half-ass manner they had decided among themselves."

"She's not too far off," Riley added with a chuckle. "Despite the realism of this game world, they're treating this just like any other MMO. They've created smallish bands of their own guild or group members and plan to wing it – or something…"

Jason could see a group of individuals standing on the oil-coated docks below the cliffs. "Like those people? Did you mention the oil?"

"They're idiots," Riley replied in irritation. "I confronted them and explained about the oil, but they still insisted on fighting on the docks. It's like they don't care whether they're massacred. I'm honestly not sure how they survived this long."

"Dissension among the ranks, hmm?" a voice asked from behind them. The group turned to find Lord Cairn approaching, a band of purple-liveried soldiers encircling him. He now wore heavy mail armor, and a steel helm adorned his head. "I thought you travelers were supposed to be blessed by the gods. My observations over the last day or two have not been that inspiring."

Jason spared a glance at Alfred where the black cat stood nearby, his feline eyes resting on the horizon. It felt like the AI was using this as an opportunity to comment on human stupidity. "We are subject to our own faults, just the same as the residents of this world. We have our own grudges and grievances," Jason replied.

"I can see that," the Lord commented, glancing pointedly at a nearby group of players. They all had their hands resting on their weapons and glared openly at Jason's group. Yet they made no move to interfere with the legion of undead and human soldiers lining the

ridge.

"We will need to be cautious in this engagement," Jason said. "If the players revolt mid-fight or start attacking my forces, we are likely to lose the city."

Lord Cairn eyed him closely. "Our fates are intertwined then. Yet you and your group have already demonstrated that you are serious about the defense of the city. These other travelers… not so much. I will let my men know to keep a watchful eye out."

"Thank you," Jason replied. He opened his mouth to say something else but stopped short as a notification suddenly appeared in the air before him. A glance around the area confirmed that the other travelers and NPCs were viewing the same notification.

System Notice

Prepare yourselves! The invasion of Falcon's Hook will commence in fifteen minutes.

For the duration of the invasion, the area around Falcon's Hook is now declared a "global event zone." Any players that die during the event will not be able to respawn until the invasion has ended. Similarly, players and NPCs will not be able to flee the invasion area during the event.

As Jason finished reading the notice, the ground trembled. Glancing around in confusion, he could see that massive semi-translucent blue walls were erupting from the ground around the city and the bay below the cliffs. They continued to rise into the sky until they towered around the city, entirely ringing the town and giving off a faint azure glow.

"This feels like the Hippie's doing," Frank grumbled as he eyed the glowing blue barrier.

"The respawn penalty may also be a problem," Riley added. "We won't be able to draw this out, and any attrition will be costly." Her gaze shifted back to the group of players lingering on the docks. "Which makes the decision of those idiots even worse."

Jason couldn't help but agree, but they didn't have any time to make changes at this stage. Another shout sounded from along the cliff, and the group turned to find a soldier pointing out to sea. Following his finger, Jason could detect what appeared to be a small black dot on the horizon through the semi-transparent walls that now

ringed the city.

"Riley, can you make that out any better?" he asked.

The dark archer nodded and pulled her bow from her back, sighting along an arrow. Riley's eyes widened in shock a moment later. "That's the invasion force," she said in a quiet voice.

The black dot had already begun to expand into a thin line as the lizardmen advanced toward Falcon's Hook. Jason couldn't help but stare. How many of the creatures were they facing if the advancing line was already visible?

"How many do you see?" he asked, already dreading the answer.

Riley glanced at him, biting her lip nervously. "I'm not really sure. Thousands maybe?"

"Thousands?" Frank echoed. "How is that even possible? There were maybe a few hundred at most back on the island, or am I going crazy?"

Eliza looked troubled, and she adjusted her glasses. "What is it?" Jason asked the water mage.

"Well, I was watching the lizardmen carefully when we first entered the temple courtyard. You remember how they were putting out eggs to warm in the sun?" Jason nodded and motioned for her to continue. "Well, they were constantly bringing the eggs back inside the caves and replacing them. If those were just their offspring, we were probably only seeing a fraction of their total population."

The rest of the group, including Lord Cairn, were staring at the girl. "Does that make sense?" she asked, sounding uncertain.

Jason couldn't really refute her reasoning. He had managed to see a portion of the cave complex on his map after his minions were captured, but he had just assumed the caves didn't extend much further. Perhaps that had been a dumb assumption, or there had been more colonies on the island. He was kicking himself now for not investigating the lizardmen more carefully. Of course, they had been in a bit of a hurry at the time.

"That would sort of make sense," Frank said, scratching at his head and casting a wary glance at the oncoming lizardmen. "That might also be why they were so willing to sacrifice their own kind to that tentacle thing."

"We also don't know anything about how they reproduce," Eliza offered. "We covered reptiles in one of my biology classes. These creatures are a sort of lizard, so they might lay many eggs multiple times per year. They could also have some sort of asexual reproduction."

"Are you trying to say they could reproduce by themselves?" Lord Cairn asked in a concerned voice.

Eliza shrugged. “Maybe. If so, we’d have to eliminate every last one, or they’d likely set up a new home along the cliffs. They might repopulate pretty quickly.”

Riley held up a hand, sighting along her arrow again. “Theories aside, they’re moving fast. We don’t have long until they enter the bay and are within firing range.”

Jason could indeed see that the black line had thickened and grown while they were talking. He ordered his Death Knights to line up near an unoccupied portion of the cliff, and his Vilewings took to the air, knocking off several tiles from the nearby roofs as they launched themselves airborne. He then positioned his wagons behind the frontlines where he had easy access to his remaining building materials.

A hushed silence had descended upon the defenders as they saw the incoming threat. The city’s soldiers eyed the horde nervously, shifting from foot to foot and whispering quietly among themselves. Even the players looked anxious, and their once-arrogant expressions had vanished. This might have been more than they were expecting.

“Lord Cairn, would you mind if I addressed the defenders?” Jason asked politely. The Lord gave him a once over, before nodding curtly.

With that, Jason stepped forward into a clear pocket near the cliffs. “Soldiers and travelers!” he shouted, getting the attention of the men and women around him. “My name is Jason, the ruler of the Twilight Throne and the founding member of Original Sin. I have been granted temporary sovereignty over Falcon’s Hook for the duration of the invasion.”

Jason took a deep breath while he let this sink in. “The lizardmen will reach the cliffs shortly. We can see that they number in the thousands,” Jason began, his voice booming through the air. The murmuring among the players and soldiers grew louder at this revelation.

“The travelers will also be unable to respawn if they die. That means we only have one shot at this. Your lives, whether soldier or traveler, are precious. Do not take unnecessary risks or expose yourself. Stay behind the spear line and aid those that are injured. If necessary, we will retreat behind the interior fortifications,” he added, gesturing at the barricades erected between the roughshod buildings behind them.

“The only way we will end this conflict is by slaying every last creature,” Jason continued. “These lizardmen are tough and strong. I expect they will be able to scale the cliffs. They also seem to regenerate quickly, so make your blows count. Aim for vulnerable areas like the throat and heart.”

Jason looked at the men and women around him. Even the players appeared uncertain and scared. They likely hadn't been expecting to be trapped here inside Falcon's Hook. He had witnessed firsthand the effect of morale problems on an army – he had helped cause a few of them when Alexion attacked the Twilight Throne. He needed to offer them hope, despite the forces arrayed against them.

"I know many of you have no reason to trust me but remember this. I destroyed a city single-handedly. Original Sin has also defeated much greater forces with smaller numbers." He glanced pointedly at the players standing behind the rows of soldiers. "This isn't like any battle you have faced before. Yet if you stand with us, we will make it through this. If we give in to fear or infighting, we will surely lose."

A heavy silence hung over the cliffs as Jason stopped speaking. Then a single voice shouted from among the line of soldiers. "For Falcon's Hook!"

This shout was picked up by the other soldiers, quickly spreading through their ranks. Even some of the players gave in, adding their voices to the cacophony of noise. Within moments, a roaring cry cascaded from the cliffs as the travelers and soldiers vented their fear and anxiety into the air. The soldiers began stomping their boots in sequence like the beating of a war drum, the ground shuddering and trembling under their combined weight.

Without further ado, the support groups began casting defensive and offensive enhancement spells on anyone nearby. Flashes of azure and ivory light erupted from among the ranks of soldiers. Meanwhile, Eliza had approached Jason, and she handed him several potions.

"The usual," the water mage said with a worried smile.

"Thank you," Jason replied, pulling the stoppers and chugging the contents quickly.

"Jason, look," Riley said, pointing at the incoming lizardmen.

Riley hadn't lied. The invasion force was moving fast, and Jason could now see why. Dozens of massive rafts had been constructed of rough wooden timbers, their surfaces covered in legions of the hulking lizardmen. Each raft was being pulled by a group of serpents, their bodies twining through the water and pulling the platforms so quickly that a wave had formed at the front of the line of rafts.

Other lizardmen rode the serpents through the waves, and more seemed to be swimming along beside the floating platform, their shadowy green bodies barely visible below the surface. Jason could only assume that there were hundreds more hiding under the water.

Jason could hear the nervous whispers of the soldiers and players around him, and a hollow weight settled in his stomach. He

channeled his dark mana forcefully, trying to push back the worry and doubt that threatened to cloud his mind. This battle was going to be on a scale he had never encountered before.

Riley's hand landed on Jason's shoulder, and he flinched. He turned to look at the archer and noticed that her irises were now a solid obsidian. "It will be okay," she said with a grin. "Just do your thing. We're with you."

"Always," Frank said, wrapping his arm around Eliza's shoulder despite the uncomfortable look on the water mage's face. "Even if we're all about to die horribly."

"Thanks for that," Jason muttered.

"Riley, do you want to handle the archers? Frank, you can lead the spearman. Eliza, maybe you should stay back here near me and lend support as needed."

His friends all nodded and moved off to take up their positions. Jason made certain to leave a couple Death Knights with each of them for protection. He still didn't trust the players.

"Archers prepare to fire," Riley cried a moment later, her voice carrying over the noise reverberating across the cliff face. Hundreds of men and women, players and NPCs alike, nocked their arrows and pointed their bows toward the sky.

The lizardmen horde was just barely beginning to enter the bay, their scaly green bodies passing unharmed through the glowing blue wall that ringed the bay. The line of rafts was so long that they were forced to clump up to funnel into the semi-circle created by the cliffs. At a gesture from Riley, the archers released. A cloud of arrows raced through the air, creating a humming sound like a legion of locusts as they sped toward the lizardmen.

The first wave of projectiles slammed against the rafts, embedding themselves into scaly green flesh as the lizardmen roared in pain and rage. Yet Jason could already see many of the beasts ripping the arrows from their bodies and hurling the offending shafts into the waves as their wounds quickly closed. Only a few dozens of the creatures lay unmoving on the rafts or fell into the water of the bay.

Riley kept up her barrage as the rafts drifted toward the cliffs, black shafts whistling through the air. The occasional overzealous mage would sometimes launch a bolt of ice or fire toward the oncoming horde, the missile dissipating harmlessly at this range. In contrast, Jason waited patiently, keeping his Vilewings in reserve where they circled the cliffs high overhead. His new minions were difficult to re-build, and his lightning crystal supply was limited. He needed the lizardmen to reach the cliffs first where they would be more vulnerable.

As the first of the rafts neared the docks, Riley glanced over at Jason. He gave her a curt nod. Turning back to her archers, the Fury shouted her new orders, “Fire mages assist! Ready flame arrows and aim for the docked ships.”

The group of archers standing around Riley immediately pulled a new set of arrows from their quivers, the tips wrapped in oil-soaked rags. A fire mage walked down each line, lighting the arrows rapidly. Then the group pointed their bows toward the sky.

“Steady!” Riley shouted. The lizardmen were now piling onto the wooden piers, their heavy footsteps cracking the wooden boards as they poured toward the ramparts leading up the side of the cliffs. The front line of spearman clutched their weapons in a white-knuckled grip, their faces grim as they watched the oncoming horde.

“Steady!” she repeated.

The lizardmen had finally reached the bottom of the cliff. They moved at an incredible speed, their tails lashing at the air behind them as they sped forward. By Jason’s estimate, hundreds of the creatures already lined the docks.

“Fire!” Riley screamed. Suddenly, the archers released, and a wave of glowing orange arrows streaked through the sky. Instead of aiming for the lizardmen or the docks – their surface still shiny with oil – the arrows landed primarily on the ships rocking gently against the docks far below.

For a long, painful second, nothing happened. Then flames rippled and curled across the decks of the vacant ships before spreading quickly below decks. The reptilian creatures glanced at the flames in surprised confusion, slowing and hesitating, but they didn’t have time to react.

The ships exploded in a torrential wave of flames as the fires ignited the oil barrels below deck. The blasts instantly incinerated the beasts standing too close and threw dozens more across the dock. Spreading aggressively to the rafts and the docks, the flames were like a living thing. They consumed the oil coating the wooden piers hungrily and raced toward the ramparts leading up the cliffs. Not sparing the lizardmen, the fire engulfed the creatures, and their cries echoed through the bay as they were burned alive.

Meanwhile, the front wave of lizardmen had nearly reached the top of the cliffs but was immediately met with a hail of spells and arrows that blunted their assault. The flames soon caught them from behind, igniting reptile and wood alike. Many of the beasts leaped for the water as a last resort, falling hundreds of feet to the rocks below where their bodies landed with a sickening crunch. Others fared better, landing in the waters of the bay, and immediately diving under the crashing waves to avoid the flames that were spreading across the

water.

Jason stared in shock, watching as hundreds of the lizardmen were burned alive. Yet with a sickening weight in his stomach, he saw that thousands more still waited on the rafts hovering through the bay, their beady eyes watching the docks and ramparts blaze. Oil now coated the surface of the water around the docks and spread outward slowly – making it appear that the bay itself was on fire.

The lizardmen stopped their assault, and Jason wondered for a moment whether they planned to delay their attack until the fires died down. Then a harsh cry rose from the ranks of lizardmen, and thousands of scaly heads turned to a massive square raft near the back of the group. Even at this distance, Jason could just barely make out the form of the lizardmen priestess – her telltale headdress and armor making her easy to spot. A group of creatures stood around her in a circle, kneeling on the rough wooden beams.

Azure lines of energy began to form between the lizardmen and the priestess. A ball of blue energy formed in the air before her and grew in size at an alarming rate. Jason tried to urge his Vilewings to attack, but it was already too late. The spell finished, and a beam of sapphire light shot toward the sky – eerily reminiscent of the light Jason and his group had witnessed as they were fleeing Anguine Isle.

The clouds above Falcon's Hook immediately began to seethe and boil, spinning in a slow vortex around the beam of light. They started to thicken and grow a dark gray, blotting out the sun. A moment later, a raindrop splattered against Jason's cheek and he rubbed at the droplet, his eyes on the sky. Thunder peeled through the bay, and then a veritable deluge began to fall.

It was as though the lizardmen had turned on a faucet. Water cascaded down from the sky, hammering the cliffs and the still-burning docks and ramparts. The rainfall quickly began to wash away the oil and quench the fires. Steam filtered through the air and was accompanied by the triumphant cries of the lizardmen still standing on the rafts lining the bay.

Despite the dark mana that pulsed through his veins, Jason could feel his own fear mounting. This was large-scale magic at work, not the spells of a single mage. He hadn't even realized that mages could combine their spellcasting… Which raised the question, what more did the lizardmen have in store for them?

As the last of the flames dissipated, the lizardmen began moving their rafts through the wreckage that was now the docks. Dozens of the creatures jumped overboard and scaled the rocks at the bottom of the cliffs. Their clawed hands slammed into the rocky wall, allowing them to climb the uneven surface with surprising agility.

"This is not going to be easy," Eliza murmured from beside

Jason, her eyes fixed on the swarm of creatures climbing the cliff toward their position.

“No. No, it isn’t,” Jason replied quietly.

Chapter 33 - Thunderous

Ash and smoke spiraled up from the keep's courtyard in the Crystal Reach, blotting out the sun and casting the area in artificial darkness. Alexion's gaze rested on the pentagram inscribed in the center of the courtyard. The lines of energy blazed with crimson energy, and a dark miasma had begun to form in the epicenter of the diagram, twisting and pulsing like a living thing.

As the last of the slaves perished, and the cries of pain finally stopped, a hushed silence descended upon the courtyard – all eyes focused on the glowing pentagram. Alexion let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding and his knuckles were white where he clutched at the hilt of his sword. The soldiers and nephilim on the walls were shifting restlessly, their hands gripping their weapons and hovering over the release levers for the ballistae that were still pointed at the center of the courtyard.

The miasma in front of Alexion pulsed one last time and then abruptly vanished. There was no catastrophic display of power nor any ominous music. Instead, an old man now stood calmly in the center of the pentagram. He wore a plain robe, his hands tucked into the large sleeves. From what Alexion could tell, he was unarmed.

"Well, this is certainly interesting," the Old Man said, his face obscured by a deep cowled hood. He spoke quietly, but his voice seemed to carry across the courtyard – as though he was whispering in each soldier's ear.

Alexion swallowed hard against the knot in his throat, trying to regain his composure. This was just another enemy – one of many. "Do not speak, abomination," Alexion spat, brandishing his blade and summoning his light mana. A halo of golden energy immediately surrounded him, motes of mana drifting through the protective sphere.

The Old Man's head tilted slightly in Alexion's direction. "I suppose you must be the Lady's new pet," he observed calmly, unperturbed by Alexion's shouted command or his defensive shield. "I can't say that I'm impressed. This must be why Jason has so easily bested you in the past."

The insidious voice in Alexion's mind screeched in outrage, urging him to strike now – to put this feeble old man in his place. He couldn't help but spare a glance at his soldiers and Confessors. How dare this so-called god question Alexion's strength or his authority? He tried feebly to tamp down on this impulse, but he felt himself losing ground.

"What did you say to me?" Alexion demanded.

The Old Man coughed politely into the sleeve of his robe. "Did I stutter? My apologies, old age can do that to a person. I was just pointing

out that you appear to be an infantile whelp, suckling at the Lady's teat. I knew my sister was desperate – but this? This is just too much – or maybe too little…"

Rage boiled and frothed in Alexion's mind. "I will show you what this 'whelp' is capable of you old fool. Kill him!" Alexion screamed, gesturing to his soldiers along the walls.

All at once, the ballistae pointed at the Old Man released, massive wooden bolts hurtling toward him even as the nephilim summoned bolts of light. A maelstrom of projectiles rained down on the center of the courtyard. Alexion expected the Old Man to resist, to cast a spell, to do… something. Yet he just stood placidly inside the pentagram, seemingly unconcerned by the missiles streaking toward him.

The steel-tipped bolts struck the god's body with terrible force, tearing through the fabric of his robes. Plunging into his flesh, the missiles impaled his form. His body jerked with each impact, and the spears lifted him from the ground, suspending him in the air. Where missiles struck, black oozing blood welled and poured to the ground, staining the dirt a dark obsidian. The Old Man coughed harshly, dark blood bubbling at his lips. Yet his face remained concealed.

A rain of light magic struck his form, destroying his robes and revealing pale, wrinkled skin. As the mana touched his flesh, his skin boiled and welts appeared. His skin tore and broke, peeling away under the barrage. And yet the soldiers kept going, pummeling the Old Man with missiles and bolts of energy until his body was a broken wreck hanging from the center of the pentagram – his eerie black blood trickling down his limbs and dripping to the ground.

Alexion raised a hand, and the onslaught ceased. The Old Man hung from the missiles that had penetrated his body. His robes were nothing more than rags, revealing that he was completely unarmed. Strangely, his face was still covered in shadow despite the light from the smoldering pillars nearby.

Alexion stalked forward, the hollow void filling his mind with its tantalizing promise of power. Silence had descended upon the courtyard as his soldiers and nephilim watched the dark god intently. Alexion could see the Old Man's chest rising and falling feebly. He wanted to kill the god himself; to slay him with his own hand and show his men that he was the Lady's champion.

He stepped over the exterior lines of power encircling the god until he was standing only a few feet away. He raised his sword and placed the tip against the Old Man's chest, the blade searing the man's skin under the effects of Alexion's light magic enhancements.

"All of those tough words from this? This frail excuse for a god?" Alexion shouted, his eyes wild as he spun and gestured to his soldiers lining the walls. His men looked on mutely, their expressions warring between

confusion and devotion.

"Here it will end. Today I will kill a god!" Alexion roared.

Then he plunged his blade into the Old Man's chest, the metal sinking quickly into his skin and tendrils of smoke curling away from the wound. The god's body gave a jerk, and then he hung limply from the spears. Blood bubbled at his lips, and he gave a gurgling croak as he feebly tried to suck in air. His chest stopped moving, and a final hiss of breath escaped his lips.

The voice in his mind roared in triumph as Alexion witnessed the god's death, a feeling of exquisite bliss overwhelming his senses. He had done it. He had finally done it. He had killed a god! He would rule this world and burn down the Twilight Throne with his own hands. No one could stop him now. No one!

* * *

The crash of steel and the rumble of thunder were almost deafening as the battle raged along the cliffs and in the bay below. Jason ordered his Death Knights to press forward, preparing to reinforce the spearman. Hundreds of lizardmen dug their sharp claws into the rocky surface of the cliff, their arms and legs bulged as they lifted themselves up to the ridge.

The spearman along the cliff's edge stabbed forward with their spears frantically, the metal tips impaling scaly flesh as soon as the creatures came within range. However, as Jason looked on, he saw one of the soldiers pulled over the edge, a lizardman grabbing his spear and pulling hard. The man screamed in fear as he plummeted to the rocks at the bottom of the cliff – his voice abruptly cutting off with a sickening crunch. More and more of the soldiers were being ripped from their positions along the ridge, the lizardmen letting them strike and then using the opportunity to pull the soldiers over the edge.

"Archers, keep firing. Keep firing until we have no arrows left!" Riley shouted above the din of the battle.

Her archers nocked arrow after arrow, the dark bolts racing through the heavy rainfall that still cascaded down upon the cliffs. The missiles streaked through the air and embedded themselves in creatures still lining the rafts floating in the bay below. Even with the number of lizardmen scurrying up the cliffs, hundreds more still waited on the platforms.

At a command from Jason, his Vilewings struck. They descended from the clouds, falling into a steep dive toward the lizardmen scaling the cliffs. Their lightning-infused claws sliced

through scaly flesh, stunning the creatures and knocking them from their rocky perch – their bodies crashing brutally against the stones at the base of the cliff only moments later. Even their natural regeneration wasn't enough to compensate for the fall. Their bloodied, broken bodies drifted underwater and floated on the waves that crashed against the cliff face.

Despite their losses, the lizardmen continued to fight back. The creatures on the rafts began launching crude wooden spears at Jason's new flying minions. The skeletal harpies dodged many of the missiles, yet some found purchase, slicing through bone wings and embedding themselves in their torsos. One of his Vilewings gave a final cry before crashing into the rafts. The winged creature tore into the lizardmen around it, fighting viciously even as they hacked at it with their roughshod weapons and claws.

"Jason, look!" Eliza urged, pointing at the priestess' raft near the back of the invading force.

The priestess and a group of other lizardmen adorned in tribal headdresses and equipment had lined up on a raft in the center of the invading force. Globes of water were forming in the air in front of them, growing swiftly in size. Uncertainty warred in Jason's mind as he tried to anticipate what they were casting.

"Can you inspect their spell?" he asked hurriedly, spinning to look at Eliza.

"I… I don't know," the water mage murmured.

"Try. Just focus on the globes in front of them and use the skill," Jason insisted.

Eliza squinted as she concentrated on the spells being cast by the group of lizardmen mages. A moment later, her mouth fell open. "Oh, my… They are targeting the archers!" she said, turning to Jason with wide eyes.

Jason didn't wait for more information. "Riley!" he screamed. The archer's head whipped in his direction, her eyes a dark obsidian. "Have your archers take cover!"

Riley gave a nod and began screaming commands at her archers. The men and women around her broke formation and dove further back along the ridge. Yet it was already too late. The lizardmen completed their spells – orbs of water breaking apart and tendrils of vapor racing toward the group of archers along the cliffs. Instead of directly harming the soldiers, the water streamed among their ranks, forming thick balls of liquid. The archers eyed the substance skeptically, slowing their attempt to retreat.

That was a mistake.

The orbs suddenly blossomed in size, forming thick arms and legs. The water condensed until it was nearly opaque. A moment later,

a dozen massive water golems stood in the middle of the ranks of archers. They swung their arms heavily, their blows throwing several of the soldiers over the edge of the cliff. One of the magical creatures stepped forward, grabbing a soldier and forcing her into its body. The woman screamed, but her shouts were muffled by the water as it entered her lungs and she slowly drowned. Meanwhile, the creature had kept moving, swinging its arms rapidly as it decimated the group of archers around it.

The soldiers scattered in every direction, their lines breaking under the assault. “Fire mages, target the golems!” Jason shouted, gesturing at the NPCs standing nearby.

A torrent of fire erupted around the water golems, steam hissing and spitting where the heavy rainfall beat against the magical flames. The fire mages kept channeling their mana into the *Fire Walls*, intensifying the heat. Several of the water golems slowly began to break apart, their bodies burning away. The rest were quickly dealt with as the spearman turned to help the archers. The players engaged the creatures and buried them under a hail of magical projectiles.

Despite their efforts, Jason could see that the attack had already served its purpose. The lizardmen scaling the cliffs had used the distraction to gain a small foothold at the top of the cliff – wiping out a group of spear-wielding soldiers. Jason ordered his Death Knights forward to engage the lizardmen. Seeing the new threat, Frank joined them, his legs sprouting thick black hair as the barbarian led the charge.

Along with Frank, nearly a dozen of Jason’s hulking skeletons thundered across the small clearing, gaining momentum as they leveled their spiked shields at the growing group of lizardmen. They continued to pick up speed until they were running at nearly a full sprint, their skeletal tails lashing at the air behind them. The lizardmen hissed at them in challenge as they saw the incoming threat, beating their chests as though to taunt the undead.

The Death Knights collided with the scaly creatures, and their spiked shields impaled reptilian flesh. Their momentum shoved dozens of the lizardmen over the edge of the cliff, and rage-filled roars erupted from their throats as they plummeted to the rocks below. Some of his skeletons weren’t able to stop their headlong charge, several of them following the lizardmen over the edge and plummeting to the bay.

Frank struck around himself in a rage, his battleaxes darting through the air – severing arms and ripping open arteries. Fresh, bright-red blood jetted from the wounds, coating his body even as he howled his rage into the sky.

“Soldiers!” Jason roared. “Help Frank! Reinforce the line along

the cliff!"

The NPCs and players struggled to follow his orders, pushing forward to fill the gap in the line. Eliza's *Obscuring Mist* wound around Frank and the defending soldiers, pulsing with a malignant red light as she tried to heal their injuries. Jason also aided his friend, using *Specialized Zombie* to raise the NPCs and players that had fallen under the lizardmen's attack. The newly-minted undead pulled themselves from the ground and shambled back into place, the other soldiers sparing them a horrified glance before turning their attention back to the battle at hand.

Meanwhile, Jason's Vilewings had been making a sizable dent in the lizardmen scaling the cliffs. He watched as as they grabbed one of the reptiles, lightning crackled along their claws, stunning the creature as its muscles jerked and twitched. Dozens of the lizardmen had been dropped to their deaths among the rocks at the base of the cliff.

"How are we doing Eliza?" Jason asked, turning back to the water mage.

Her gaze was fixed on the lizardmen at the base of the bay. "Their numbers are starting to dwindle," she said. Between lighting the docks ablaze and the defensive line at the cliffs, they had killed hundreds if not thousands of the beasts already.

However, a frown lingered on Jason's face. "What is it?" What's wrong?" Eliza asked.

"This feels too easy…" Jason murmured.

A roar from the rafts floating in the bay drew his attention. The priestess and her team of mages were working on something new. The other mages had formed a circle around the priestess, and smaller, unarmed lizardmen stood in front of each mage.

"What are they doing?" Jason murmured. He spared a glance at Riley and saw that she was occupied with regrouping her archers. He would have to handle this himself.

He couldn't afford to wait for the mages to complete their spell. With a quick mental command, his Vilewings gave an ear-piercing cry and dove toward the rafts. The lizardmen soldiers surrounding the mages acted quickly, a hail of wooden spears intercepting his skeletal bird-creatures. The projectiles shattered wings and buried themselves into several of Jason's minions, their lifeless corpses falling into the waves of the bay.

Several of the Vilewings made it through the flurry of missiles. Yet, as Jason watched, he saw a group of lizardmen warriors crouch and then launch themselves airborne. They snatched at the birds mid-air, grappling them and wrapping their strong arms around each creature. The group slammed against one of the rafts near the mages,

and a horde of scaly creatures quickly descended upon the skeletal harpies, ripping their bodies apart.

"Damn it," Jason whispered. He only had a few of the Vilewings left, and he couldn't afford to make another attempt.

Not that it mattered.

A massive ball of sapphire energy had formed in front of the priestess. As he and Eliza watched with wide eyes, the lizardmen mages ringing the priests suddenly pulled crude daggers from the belts at their waists. In unison, they placed the blades to the necks of the unarmed lizardmen in front of them and then ripped through their throats in a quick gesture. Crimson blood jetted from the wounds and sprayed against the ball of energy floating above the raft.

The blood began mixing with the massive sphere of mana, turning it a dull purple that glowed and pulsed ominously. The other lizardmen mages backed away quickly, but the priestess still stood next to the orb. She spared one last glance at the cliffs before stepping forward – her arms wide as she entered the ball of energy.

Jason was stunned as he watched the scene unfolding before him. The mana ripped and tore at the priestess' body, melting away her skin and bone and absorbing her very essence into the spell. As the last trace of the priestess disappeared, the sphere exploded in a cascading ring of energy that was so bright that Jason was forced to look away. Waves rippled out from the raft, and the other platforms were pushed away from the force of the blast.

The other players and NPCs along the cliff turned to stare and even the lizardmen scaling the walls had frozen as they watched the scene playing out in the bay. As the mana began to dissipate, Jason's mouth dropped open in surprise. A massive creature now rested on the platform. There was only one-word Jason could think of to describe this beast.

Dragon. It's a gods damned dragon!

The priestess had transformed. Her body had elongated and thickened until it was nearly forty feet long. Plate-like, sapphire scales now dotted her form, and she stood on four brawny legs, three-foot-long claws curving away from each foot. Glowing blue wings had sprouted from the beast's back, flapping experimentally and creating small waves of water to ripple across the bay.

As the players and NPCs along the cliff looked on, the dragon shifted back onto its hind legs, craning its serpentine neck toward the sky. Its mouth gaped open, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. Then it let out a roar, the sound echoing through the bay and causing the very air to tremble with the force of its cry.

"Oh, fuck this!" a player shouted nearby, backpedaling away from the cliff and heading for the interior barricade. Several other

NPCs and players had the same idea, scrambling back as they caught sight of the new threat.

"It's a dragon!" someone screamed.

The beast crouched for a moment before leaping into the air, its wings flapping powerfully as it rose through the torrential rainfall. The force of its takeoff ripped the raft apart, lizardmen scrambling in every direction to escape the wreckage.

As it raced toward the cliffs, the soldiers in its line of fire backed away quickly. A few brave souls tried to keep the line, leveling their spears at the creature. Neither group was saved. Opening its maw once more, the dragon breathed a torrent of frost at the soldiers. Where the cloud touched the raindrops, it turned them into jagged shards of ice. The effect was a maelstrom of frozen shrapnel. It ripped and tore its way through the line of soldiers, freezing their limbs and tearing through their armor and skin like paper.

A moment later, the dragon landed on the cliff. It began making short work of the defenders. Its claws impaled one player and its frigid breath froze another solid. It immediately followed up with its tail, smashing through the frozen player causing his body to explode in a collection of icy fragments. The remaining lizardmen used the distraction to continue scaling the cliffs, piling over the edge and taking up a loose formation as they mowed down the fleeing players and NPCs.

"Retreat to the interior barricades!" Jason screamed. His shouts were picked up by others as the soldiers and players scrambled toward the motley wreckage of broken carts and stalls that lined the streets leading into the interior of Falcon's Hook.

Jason and Eliza stood further down the cliff line and out of the immediate path of the dragon, while the remaining Death Knights and newly-raised undead circled them. Frank landed heavily next to Jason a moment later, his wings shrinking and disappearing as he let his shapeshifting abilities lapse. Jason glanced to his side and saw that Riley had also managed to regroup with them, her armor torn at her shoulder and blood welling from gashes in her arms and legs. Eliza immediately handed them potions to recover their health, mana, and stamina.

"What do we do?" Frank asked, breathing heavily as he looked at the beast.

"That thing looks challenging," Riley added in a concerned voice. "Maybe we should retreat further into the city and use the buildings as cover."

First things first, Jason thought. They needed more information.

"Eliza?" Jason asked, turning to the water mage.

The girl squinted again as she concentrated on the creature.

“It’s called an Azure Dragon,” she reported. “Its level 500 and its listed as a boss-level creature. Its health and mana are both unknown. It… it looks like it might be vulnerable to lightning – similar to the Tentacle Horror.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic,” Frank muttered. “I guess that means I have some work do.” As he finished speaking, he brandished his axes, lightning arcing up the metal as he channeled mana through his gloves.

“I don’t think that’s going to be enough,” Jason replied, his eyes on the scene unfolding along the cliffs. The dragon was rampaging among the players while soldiers and lizardmen reinforcements were clambering over the edge of the cliff. Most of their own forces had retreated to the barricades along the openings to each road, and a few players had scaled the buildings and were standing on rooftops while pelting the lizardmen and the dragon with spells and missiles.

“We need a distraction,” Riley said, glancing at Jason with a small smile despite the desperate situation. “And I think it’s your turn.”

Jason couldn’t help but match her grin, his mana flaring powerfully through his veins. His eyes skimmed across his remaining Death Knights, the nearby wagons filled with corpses, and the dead that now riddled the top of the cliff. With this many building materials, he might be able to create something suitably terrifying.

“Okay,” Jason began, “I’m going to summon a decoy. Frank and Riley, you need to take that damn dragon out while it’s distracted.”

“What about me?” Eliza asked tentatively, glancing nervously at the dragon.

“Buffs,” Jason replied, laying a hand on the water mage’s shoulder. “I need mana potions, and I need you to increase my mana pool if possible. Then make Frank drink as many enhancement potions as you can.”

“Got it,” the water mage replied. She pulled a number of vials from her pack and handed them to Jason. He downed the contents quickly, not bothering to see if his teammates followed through with his orders. He had a lot of work to do.

As his hands began winding through the gestures of *Custom Skeleton*, Jason could feel a familiar surge of dark mana – the chill energy wiping away his doubts and reservations. He felt a strange, ill-formed memory tugging at the edges of his mind as the sensation washed over him. He could vaguely remember a shimmering blue deathscape and the fleeting images of nightmarish creatures pulling themselves from the darkness. However, the memory was ill-formed and elusive – hovering just out of his mental reach.

Instead of shying away from the feeling, Jason embraced it,

giving himself over to the surge and swell of power that flooded his veins. This wasn't a time for doubt. The world began to slow to a crawl around him, the droplets of rain falling ever-so-slowly and his teammates' movements becoming exaggerated.

The control console appeared in his vision, and the resources nearby were suddenly highlighted in blue. Hundreds of corpses riddled the top of the cliff and Jason could feel his power surge again as his thoughts raced, trying to decide what to build. His gaze rested on the nearby dragon, seemingly frozen in place. It stood on its hind legs, a spray of frost erupting from its mouth and engulfing a nearby group of players as bolts of energy hovered in the air around it like fireflies.

Then he realized what he needed to build.

A grim grin tugged at his lips, and he abandoned himself to his dark mana. With a thought, he *pulled* at the materials around him. Hard. Bones ripped their way free of lifeless corpses, and his Death Knights broke apart in a whirlwind of bone and viscera. Blood sprayed across the top of the ridge, the substance creating a fine mist that covered the area.

It wasn't enough.

Jason's attention shifted to the corpses lingering at the bottom of the cliff, the result of hundreds of dead lizardmen. He commanded the materials to join him, and they answered his call willingly – bursting from the waves at the base of the cliff to a jet-like spray of salty seawater.

A whirling maelstrom of bone soon orbited Jason like a black hole, the ivory materials so dense that they blotted out his view of the world around him. Then he began to build. He summoned all of his rage, anger, and terror. His desperation and his fears. His triumphs and his challenges. He poured his heart and soul into this new creation.

The creature began to take shape in front of him. The air rippled and shimmered as Jason dumped his entire mana pool into this single, unholy abomination. It clawed its way into the world – not as though he was *building* this monster – but as though he was *summoning* it into being. The feeling was strange, as though he were tapping into some well of power that lingered at the edge of his consciousness.

As quickly as the feeling overcame him, it vanished. Only moments later, Jason stared awestruck at his new creation. With numb fingers, he punched in a name and slammed his fist down on the control panel. The world immediately sped back up, and a thunderous crash reverberated from the top of the cliff face as his new minion landed heavily on the edge of the ridge. Every player, soldier,

and creature turned to witness the abomination that had been summoned to Falcon's Hook.

Jason was suddenly overcome by weakness, and he dropped to his knees, notifications cascading in the corner of his vision. He glanced up at his new creation. A bloody mist still drifted through the area – a product of the corpses he had torn apart in search of more bones. Through the crimson haze, Jason could see that his creation stood nearly thirty feet tall, it's bipedal body a convoluted mass of twisted bones and layers of ivory plates. Enormous bat-like wings hung from its back with sheets of dark mana hanging between the bony spikes. Its arms ended in long scythes, lightning crackling along the edge of the blades.

The creature raised its head to the sky, mammoth horns of bones spiraling from an ivory crown atop its head. It released a roar filled with rage and longing, and a miasma of dark mana erupted from its throat, spiraling around it in an aura of darkness. The mana infused itself into its bone armor, causing the ivory surface to shimmer with unholy energy.

A desperate, mad smile was painted on Jason's face as he witnessed his new creation. A Death Lord had been born into the world. "Kill it," Jason croaked, pointing a finger at the dragon perched on the other side of the ridge.

The Death Lord turned to look at Jason, the bones of its face crunching and contorting as its expression warped into a manic sneer that matched its master's. Then it disappeared in a flash of movement. A moment later, it reappeared on the other side of the ridge, slamming into the dragon, and the pair rolled across the ground. They crashed into one of the buildings ringing the ridge, the wood splintering and the house collapsing under the force of the attack.

The dragon clawed at the Death Lord, its talons having difficulty finding purchase against the skeletal creature's mana-infused armor. Meanwhile, Jason's new minion slammed its scythes against the dragon's scales, and the obsidian weapons tore into the chinks in the dragon's armor. Glowing blue blood rocketed from the wounds, and the dragon gave a scream of rage. It shoved with its four limbs, throwing the Death Lord across the ridge.

The undead creature's wings unfurled, and it stopped midair, hovering and letting out another hungry roar – daring the dragon to take to the air. The serpentine beast rose to the challenge, lifting itself from the ground and beating its own wings as it took flight. The wind from the frost dragon's wings swept across the ridge causing players and lizardmen alike to hurtle over the edge of the cliff.

"Jason!" someone was shouting – the sound indistinct through the pain that crashed through his head. He turned to find Eliza beside

him, shaking his shoulder. “We need to move back to the defensive line,” she urged, pointing at a makeshift bulwark behind them.

He nodded feebly, letting Frank help him up and half carry him to the fortification. Once they were behind the wall, he turned to Eliza, “Give Frank your potions. All of them.”

“But… but he might die,” the water mage stuttered. “The blood toxicity…”

“Just do it,” Jason ordered, pain raging through his head. He felt so tired.

“Hand them over,” Frank said, a look of determination painted on his face. “I’ll be fine.”

The water mage grudgingly complied, handing him nearly a dozen glowing vials. “This is a bad idea,” she murmured.

“Of course it is,” Frank replied glibly as he downed the contents of each vial. “Jason came up with it, after all.”

“Where do you want me?” Riley asked, stooping beside Jason.

“On the fortification,” he croaked. “Hit the dragon with everything you have. Frank will only have a few seconds after your strike.”

Riley nodded and stood. The players and soldiers around them eyed the group anxiously as concussive explosions reverberated across the ridge – evidence of the fight raging between the Death Lord and the Azure Dragon. Riley took up a position on the fortification, pulling her bow from her back and nocking an arrow. Dark mana immediately began to condense around the tip, and the other soldiers backed away quickly.

Meanwhile, Frank had finished downing his potions. “Are you okay?” Eliza asked him nervously.

“Suuure, I’m fine, silly potion lady,” he replied, slurring heavily and wobbling slightly.

“Frank,” Jason snapped, getting his friend’s attention. His eyes seemed unfocused as he turned to look at Jason. “I need you to concentrate. You are going to wait until Riley fires and then you are going to go kill that dragon. You got it?”

His friend glanced over the barricade quickly, his brow furrowing. “Dragon?” he slurred. “You mean the friendly-looking unicorn playing with the teddy bear?”

Jason shook his head, immediately regretting the movement as a new wave of pain cascaded through his head. “Sure. The unicorn. I want you to kill it.”

Frank looked at the dragon again, the beast grappling with the Death Lord in mid-air. “You sure? He looks really nice.”

“I’m positive,” Jason said through gritted teeth. He spared a questioning glance at Eliza and saw her shrug.

"Okey-dokey!" Frank replied, with a small salute.

The barbarian promptly scrambled over the barricade and stood out in the open despite the battle raging around him, his axes held at the ready. Lizardmen were racing toward each of the patchwork fortifications. Jason saw them coming and turned to the soldiers and players around him. "Just buy him some time. Keep the creatures off him!" he ordered, his head beginning to feel a bit better. They nodded and began hurling bolts of energy and launching missiles at the oncoming beasts – trying desperately to keep them away from Frank.

Jason pulled himself to his feet carefully, Eliza stepping forward and helping him stand. He leaned on the water mage heavily as he surveyed the battle raging at the top of the ridge, his hands already beginning to cast *Specialized Zombie* on the nearby corpses to reinforce the defenders around him.

The Death Lord and the dragon hovered over the battlefield, crashing against each other in a flurry of movement. An errant blast of ice or malignant energy would occasionally spray the forces fighting on the ground, leaving a wave of destruction in their wake. Yet Jason could see that his minion was slowly losing, the dragon chipping away at the unholy creature's health despite the ragged gashes in its own scales.

Meanwhile, Riley was prepping her attack, Eliza's healing mist curling around her, barely allowing her to maintain her waning health. Her arrow was leveled at the dragon, dark energy spiraling around the tip and forming a dense miasma. Using the bow's special ability to channel her own life into the attack, tendrils of red coiled up her wrist and stained the malignant ball of energy crimson.

Frank was readying himself as well. He stood outside the barricade, an axe held in each hand as lizardmen were being cut down around him. He paid them no mind – his gaze fixed on the battle raging in the skies. With a sudden roar, wings ripped from his back and feathers sprouted from the spindly arms of flesh. His arms also rippled and contorted, doubling in size with bands of rope-like muscle that bulged beneath his skin. His new claws curled painfully around the hilts of his axes.

When he saw that his teammates were ready, Jason issued a final order to his Death Lord. The skeletal creature turned to him, and the unholy balls of dark energy that were its eyes met Jason's. Time seemed to slow for a moment, Jason's brow wrinkling in confusion.

What was this?

The Death Lord gave him a final salute with one of its scythe-adorned arms and Jason felt his breath catch – a hollow pit forming in his stomach. That was the same gesture he had seen a lone mercenary give before he launched himself into a maelstrom of flame…

“What…?” Jason started to ask, but it was too late.

The Death Lord launched itself forward at blinding speed. In an instant, it was beside the dragon. Its scythes plunged into the dragon’s belly even as the beast’s claws wrapped around the unholy abomination. The Death Lord paid no attention to its own defense, refusing to give up its hold on the dragon. The pair spiraled through the air toward the ridge, unable to stay airborne as they grappled.

The dragon’s claws tore into the Death Lord, ripping away its bone armor and breaking its horns. Yet the skeletal creature still clung to the beast, refusing to let go even as they slammed into the top of the ridge. The blast shook the ground and caused cracks to arc through the top of the cliff. As the debris cleared, Jason could see that the dragon lay atop the Death Lord, his minions’ skeletal arms still embedded in the beast.

Then the dragon opened its maw, it’s face only inches away from the Death Lord. Jason’s stomach lurched as the dragon emitted a violent spray of ice directly at the Death Lord’s head. The frost coiled around the undead creature, slowing its movements and freezing the bones of its face and head. The dragon lunged forward, and its maw snapped shut. The Death Lord’s head shattered, spraying frozen fragments in every direction.

Jason swallowed hard against the lump in his throat.

“Riley, now!” he shouted in a strangled cry.

The archer released her dark missile, the bolt rocketing across the top of the ridge. The mana was so dense that the bolt caused the air to ripple and contort as tendrils of dark energy lanced around it. At the same time, the missile created a furrow in the stone of the ridge as it raced across the space, spraying rock and dust into the air.

The bolt slammed into the side of the dragon’s head and exploded violently, carving away the side of the dragon’s jaw and destroying one of its horns. Glowing blue blood erupted from the creature and stained the area around it. As it tried vainly to disentangle itself from the Death Lord’s corpse, the beast roared in a mixture of pain and rage.

“Frank!” Jason shouted at his friend. “Frank go now!”

The barbarian turned and gave him a confused look, cocking his head slightly.

“Kill the unicorn!” Eliza cried from beside Jason, pointing at the dragon as her voice carried across the battlefield.

A glimmer of recognition appeared in Frank’s eyes, and he nodded. With a flap of his wings, he sped toward the dragon, lightning arcing and crackling up his axes as he prepared to strike. Eliza’s healing mist coated him so that it made it appear that he was surrounded by a halo of glowing crimson light.

“Fuck you, unicorn!” Frank screamed, his axe blades sinking simultaneously into the dragon’s skull with a sickening crunch. The force of the potion-enhanced blow and Frank’s momentum slammed the monstrous beast into the side of a building. The barbarian followed up immediately, diving after the creature and standing atop its body.

The dragon roared and writhed beneath Frank, still trapped by the Death Lord’s headless corpse. Frank didn’t relent. He slammed his weapons against the dragon’s head again and again and again, his blades slicing away its flesh and scales. Glowing sapphire blood rocketed from the fresh wounds and coated everything in the sickly blue substance.

Frank kept going, his blades slicing into the creature repeatedly. The blows carved away its horns and sunk into its eyes. The beast let out a feeble roar and then finally grew quiet, its body shuddering, but no longer putting up a fight.

As the dragon finally stopped moving, Frank raised his axes into the air and summoned *Call of the Herd*, letting out a howl of triumph. A glowing red aura enveloped him where he stood atop of the dragon’s corpse and stretched to the other players and NPCs staring at the scene in stunned silence. Then the barbarian’s gaze shifted to the remaining lizardmen

“Kill them! Kill them all!” he roared.

His cries were taken up by the other players and soldiers where they were hunkered down behind the barricades. Seeing an opportunity to turn the tide of the battle, they scrambled over the fortifications and took the fight to the lizardmen. Bolts of energy and the crash of steel echoed once more across the ridge.

Jason watched this all happen from beside Eliza and Riley. They were alive, if only barely – their bodies bloodstained and marred by signs of battle. Yet they had survived, and they were pushing the lizardmen back toward the ridge. Victory was within their reach!

Chapter 34 - Orchestrated

Claire sat in the Control Room, skimming frantically through the hundreds of video logs that were streaming down her screen. She knew that the other technicians were going through the same process, trying to filter out high-quality video content from the hundreds of streams that had ended abruptly during the battle in Falcon's Hook.

It didn't help that they had been given no warning about this global event and were severely understaffed. The situation in Falcon's Hook had also escalated much more rapidly than the technicians had expected – due in large part to the time dilation effects in-game. While the events were playing out in real time from the players' perspective, the group in the Control Room was perpetually forced to play catch up.

Robert chose that moment to reenter the room, the elevator off to the side of the lab sliding open with a faint hiss. He quickly stepped inside and made his way up to the dais. "How are we doing?" he asked Claire.

"How are we doing?" she demanded. "Really? Where have you been?"

She glanced up to find Robert standing behind her, his hand halfway to his mouth and a handful of popcorn filling his palm. "Umm, I needed a snack?" he offered.

Claire let out a pained sigh, one hand rubbing at her temple.

"Seriously though, Claire," Robert continued, taking his seat on the other side of the dais. "You need to relax. It will be fine."

"Fine? The producer from Vermillion Live has been breathing down my throat all afternoon – as though I don't already know that he needs priority access to the footage in Falcon's Hook. We're struggling to capture decent streams to send over to him."

Robert shrugged. "It can't be helped, and he knows that. Don't let him get to you. But, speaking of which, have we found some good clips yet?" Robert asked, directing this last question to the men and women ringing the dais.

One of the technicians stood up, waving at Robert to get his attention. "I've got some footage here, but I'm also noticing something strange happening in the Crystal Reach. There's a lot of activity around the keep. Do you want me to look into it?"

"Nah," Robert replied around a mouthful of popcorn. "Alex's drama is small potatoes. Let's focus on this world event. The users are all clamoring for footage of Jason's latest exploits anyway. It's all about the ratings apparently," he added with a chuckle.

"Yes, sir," the tech said. "I'll push the feed up now."

The large screen above the lab flickered to life. Every head in the control room swiveled to get a good look at the display – most of the crew anxious to see what was going on in Falcon's Hook. The information in the corner of the screen indicated that they were seeing the perspective of a player named Ralph. It also appeared that Ralph was an idiot.

He and a group of other individuals were standing on the docks below Falcon's Hook – which happened to put them dead center in front of the massive flotilla of lizardmen that were descending on the bay. The crude rafts were forced to clump together in order to fit into the narrow opening between the cliffs. The staff could already see the throng of burly lizardmen swarming across their surface.

"Holy shit," one of the technicians murmured. "There must be thousands."

The lizardmen made remarkable progress, the rafts being pulled along by massive serpents. Within only a few minutes the rafts were swarming the docks. The player onscreen attempted to hurl a few fireballs toward the incoming force, yet each blast of flame was met with a wall of water – effectively neutralizing his spells.

"I don't think this is going to work," Ralph murmured to his teammates. He sounded nervous, and the screen bobbed as he took cover behind a nearby ship.

"Yeah, no shit Sherlock," Robert commented, grabbing more popcorn.

As the lizardmen rushed the docks and thundered across the planks, the sound of buzzing filled the air. The player glanced up and saw hundreds of arrows swarming through the air, some glowing an ominous orange. Many of the projectiles slammed into the deck of the nearby ship.

"What is….?" Ralph began.

His sentence was cut off as the ship beside him suddenly erupted in a violent explosion of flame. Ralph was thrown several yards away, landing in the water of the bay. The screen was covered in green seawater for a long moment until Ralph bobbed back to the surface. What met him was an inferno of flames curling down the docks and up the ramparts scaling the cliff face.

Then the screen jerked downward and filled with seawater once more, a reptilian face swimming in front of the camera and the camera bobbing as the player struggled to swim away. In the murky background, hundreds of lizardmen could be seen weaving below the surface of the water.

Without warning, a lizardman's claws raked forward, and the screen went black.

"Holy… holy shit," Robert murmured, his surprise echoed by the other technicians.

"Just a moment, sir," a tech said. "I'll switch to the other feed I

found."

The screen changed again. Now they were witnessing the perspective of a player on the cliffs. Robert's hand froze halfway to his mouth. Some time must have passed between the two streams. This player was staring at what appeared to be a mammoth sapphire dragon, its body resting on the edge of the cliff as it ripped apart another player, his screams filling the air. Several people around the room gasped at the scene playing out on the screen.

Without warning, the ground trembled and the player spun, looking at a point further down the cliff. A maelstrom of bone was hovering around a single point, the ivory material so dense that the player couldn't see inside the whirlwind. The bones whipped through the air at a frightening pace, smashing against crates and barrels in their path and creating a shower of wooden fragments.

A moment later, the bones formed into a thing of nightmares. The creature's body dropped to the cliff with a thunderous crash, it's malevolent black eyes focusing on the dragon raging about the cliffs. It flexed its new body, the bones crackling and crunching as it experimentally swung its scythe-like arms. Then, bony wings of dark energy unfurled behind it.

"What is that thing?" the player gasped, scrambling backward to get away from the demonic creature. Even Claire was stunned, staring at the abomination with wide eyes.

Moving too fast for the player to follow, the bone creature suddenly disappeared. The player whirled, trying to find this new monster. He turned, and the screen listed to the side as the ground trembled. The massive skeletal creature was grappling with the dragon on the other end of the cliff, their bodies destroying several buildings ringing the ridgeline as they tumbled along the ground.

The pair disengaged, and the dragon breathed a stream of frost at the skeletal monstrosity. It dodged in a blur of motion, barely avoiding the blast, but the player wasn't so fortunate. He began to scream as he saw the wave of silvery ice cascading toward him, but it was already too late. A moment later, the screen blacked out.

The group in the lab sat in stunned silence for a long moment. Then Robert coughed, choking slightly on the last handful of popcorn. "Someone get the Vermillion Live producer on the phone. I was wrong, so very wrong. We need to get this up now, editing be damned!"

The staff kept glancing between him and the screen, still in shock. "What are you waiting for?" Robert shouted. "Get your asses moving!"

* * *

After the death of the dragon, the players and city soldiers managed to push the lizardmen back quickly, forcing the remaining beasts back against the edge of the cliff until the last of the creatures fell to the rocks far below. After the grueling battle, compassion was in short supply, and Jason and his group watched in numb silence as the remaining creatures were massacred in front of their eyes.

Many more of the beasts still lingered on the rafts floating in the bay, along with the serpents that they had used as mounts. However, Lord Cairn's fleet chose that moment to finally make its appearance. Dozens of ships drifted into the mouth of the bay, each vessel pivoting to level its cannons at the remaining creatures.

Thunder pealed through the bay as the ships' weapons fired, concussive blasts of flame and shrapnel ripping apart the makeshift platforms and shredding the remaining lizardmen. Soon, the waters of the bay were stained a bright red. Bloated corpses floated on the water, crashing against the base of the cliffs with each new wave.

Through it all, Jason and his group stood on the edge of the cliff, watching quietly. In contrast, the players and NPCs cheered their victory, their shouts filling the air and many people hugging each other in celebration. Others had skipped the impromptu festivities and had gone straight for the loot, their nimble fingers already relieving their dead friends and compatriots of their un-needed equipment.

"I see you all survived," a voice called from behind the group. They turned to find Lord Cairn approaching, a band of soldiers surrounding him. "Hmm, you all look a bit worse for wear," he observed as he neared the group.

"And you look rather refreshed," Jason replied dryly, eyeing the lord and his entourage. Their armor was unmarred, and each man looked alert. "Did you enjoy the show?"

A rumbling chuckle came from Lord Cairn. "Can you blame me for wishing to avoid such… *unpleasant* activities?"

"Yes, we can," Frank grumbled, his voice regaining its normal timbre as his body filtered out the toxins in Eliza's potions. "It looks like you hid behind your men and the travelers while they saved your city. And behind us, I might add."

"How *observant* of you," Lord Cairn murmured sarcastically. "I suppose that's to be expected of the almighty Original Sin."

The burly merchant lord cocked his head. "Speaking of which, you lot seem rather far from home, and I don't see any of your undead." Lord Cairn glanced around the ridgeline in mock surprise – Jason's minions having been sacrificed to create the Death Lord. "It would be unfortunate if someone were to try to collect on the bounty on your heads at a time like this."

At this last statement, the lord's guards pulled their weapons

and leveled them at Jason's group. A quick glance at the other players and NPCs around the ridge confirmed that they were now paying attention to this conversation, several travelers already wandering over with their weapons drawn. Jason's group was now potentially facing off against a few hundred of the city's remaining survivors. They were ragged and injured, but still more than enough to kill the four members of Jason's group in their current state.

"You traitor," Riley spat, glaring at Lord Cairn.

"Now, now. We don't have any need for such crude language. I'm a *businessman*. And as you can see," the lord added, waving at the destroyed docks in the bay below and the ruined buildings ringing the ridge, "our city is in desperate need of repairs. So that bounty on your heads would be rather useful to the travelers – who might even be willing to pay in hard coin."

Jason glanced at Alfred where he sat calmly nearby, unaffected by the conversation and the recent battle. Jason was surprised that the game's NPCs were aware of the real-world bounty – much less that they would be able to collect on it.

However, the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. The players had likely spoken freely about the bounty with various NPCs, and this game was incredibly realistic. Lord Cairn was capable of recognizing the value of Jason's group – both as potential allies and as hostages. The implications of that revelation were interesting. How much attention did this world's NPC pay to the travelers and the real world that they came from?

This isn't the time. I need to focus and *gather as much information as I can,* Jason urged himself. He needed to stall for time.

"So, you planned to betray us the entire time?" Jason asked, folding his arms across his chest. He was hoping the merchant lord would be arrogant enough to entertain an evil monologue.

"Something like that," Lord Cairn said with a sly grin, lowering his voice so that he couldn't be overheard by the other players. "I had planned to end this fiasco on the docks, but you backed me into a corner. After all, you provided proof publicly of Lord Baen's wrongdoing."

"But you already knew that he had betrayed his own son and ruined his house," Jason offered, the pieces clicking together in his head. His teammates glanced at him in surprise, their gaze jumping back and forth between Jason and Lord Cairn.

"Of course!" the lord replied, spreading his arms wide. "Who do you think fed Lord Baen the original information regarding the whereabouts of this so-called magical orb? The old fool was never one to turn down a bet – and he certainly proved me right in this instance. He even went so far as to send his only son and heir to his house's

fortune after this pipe dream.

"When you then offered to help fight off the invasion, I nearly burst out laughing right there," the lord continued, slapping his thigh in amusement. "As you can see, things worked out quite nicely for me – collateral damage aside. We are now the governing trade house in Falcon's Hook, and we don't have any competition."

Jason nodded to himself slowly. The lord's explanation also addressed why his fleet only showed up at the last minute. He wasn't willing to overextend or endanger his forces until he knew that victory was at hand. He had likely secreted himself away somewhere inside the city and observed the fight from a distance, hoping to hide from the lizardmen if the city fell.

"Do you think we'll go down this easily?" Frank demanded, taking a step forward. The soldiers surrounding Lord Cairn immediately bristled, a dozen weapons pointing in Frank's direction. Jason laid a calming hand on his friend's shoulder, shaking his head slowly.

"Oh, certainly not," the lord said with a patronizing smile. "I expect you will make a large fuss and put on a little show for both my men and the other travelers. Your showmanship is renowned, after all."

As Lord Cairn spoke, Jason's gaze shifted to the line of ruined buildings behind him. His *Perception* skill had picked up a small gray object flitting through the rubble. He forced himself to ignore the distraction, refocusing his attention on Lord Cairn. He just needed to buy a bit more time.

"And I suspect that the only reason you haven't killed us already is that you want the orb?" Jason asked, anticipating where the man was heading next.

"You are indeed a bright one!" Lord Cairn replied. "Well, not too bright since you fell for my ruse, but you are at least a step ahead of our late Lord Baen." As he noticed their reactions at this revelation, the lord's grin widened. "Ahh, yes. You see, our dear *departed* Lord Baen was an unfortunate victim of one of the creatures that invaded the jail. It was truly terrible – blood and entrails everywhere!"

The dark gray object had finally caught sight of the group, and Jason couldn't help but grin slightly as it approached, racing toward the group on tiny wings. A moment later, the ashen lump slammed into Riley, twining its small arms in her hair as it assumed its customary perch on her shoulder.

"Pretty lady!" Pint cried as he took a seat and hugged at her neck. "Pint miss you!"

"Pint?" Riley asked in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"What is this?" Lord Cairn demanded, gesturing at the little

creature. “Some sort of backup plan? You think an imp will save you from this situation?”

“No,” Jason replied evenly, his dark mana clawing its way through his veins and the chill energy settling once more behind his eyes. “I think they’ll stop you,” he said, gesturing behind Lord Cairn.

Two full divisions of undead had dropped from *Sneak* and now stood among the crude barricades facing the cliffs. Archers also lined the rooftops with arrows already nocked and their strings tight as they took aim at the soldiers and travelers lining the clearing. Meanwhile, foot soldiers had taken up positions on the street level, dark mages walking amid the group and malignant tendrils of mana curling around their wands and staffs.

“What… who are they?” Lord Cairn demanded, whirling on Jason.

“You see, I had a plan too,” Jason replied calmly. He took a step toward the lord, yet this time the city soldiers glanced uncertainly between Jason and the undead forces behind them, reluctant to raise their weapons. “When Frank and I left to collect corpses, I sent runners back to the Twilight Throne and requested reinforcements. I didn’t trust how easily you caved to my demands.”

Lord Cairn gritted his teeth, glaring at Jason. “What now then? Are we to have some sort of standoff?”

“Oh, not at all,” Jason replied candidly, glancing at Frank and giving a nod. “This is where we part ways. Permanently.”

The barbarian raced forward in a flash of movement. A moment later, Lord Cairn’s head tumbled to the ground, followed closely by his body. The soldiers around him stood frozen in shock, staring at their former lord’s now headless corpse.

Jason glanced at the soldiers and players as they stood wracked by indecision – uncertain whether to attack or surrender. “Lord Baen and Lord Cairn are both dead. This city is now leaderless,” Jason shouted. “The forces of the Twilight Throne stand behind you. Lay down your arms, or you will die, and your bodies will be stripped.”

The soldiers and players glanced at each other, silence hanging in the air for a long moment. Then Jason heard the first rattle of metal striking the ground as a soldier dropped his sword. A moment later, the remainder of the group followed suit, dropping their weapons. At a signal from Jason, Twilight Throne soldiers approached and began rounding up the prisoners.

One of the dark-robed soldiers peeled away from the group and approached Jason. As she neared, she pulled off her helmet, revealing Vera’s smiling face. “Now that was fun to watch. You have some speed, boy,” she said, slapping Frank on the back. “But your form was sloppy.” Frank spared a glare at the undead woman and grumbled

something under his breath about ungrateful undead as he wiped his blood-drenched blade on the late lord's tunic.

"It's good to see you, Vera," Jason said with a nod.

"The same, although it appears that we missed the main battle," Vera commented, eyeing the corpses littering the edge of the cliff and the hulking body of the dead dragon nearby – its corpse still entwined with the Death Lord.

"You should consider that a blessing," Jason said, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. Now that the battle was over, he felt exhausted.

"Perhaps," Vera acknowledged. "We secured the gate into town, and we're keeping the riffraff out for now. What do you want me to do with this lot?" she asked, pointing at the unarmed players and soldiers.

"Strip them and then let them go outside of town," Jason said. "There's been enough death today."

Vera nodded curtly and then moved off toward her soldiers, shouting orders. As she left, Jason noticed that the sapphire walls around the city began to flicker and fade. Suddenly, the walls shattered into millions of smaller fragments, glowing azure particles drifting down over the bay. At the same time, two notifications appeared in Jason's vision.

Universal System Notice

The invasion of Falcon's Hook is over. Congratulations, heroes! You have fended off the lizardmen invasion and successfully defended Falcon's Hook.

Special recognition goes out to Frank, a member of Original Sin, for slaying a world boss – the Azure Dragon. As a reward, he will be awarded the title "Serpent Slayer."

All movement and respawn restrictions in Falcon's Hook have been lifted. Travelers and NPCs may move freely within Falcon's Hook.

Quest Failed: Over Your Head

Instead of slaying the Tentacle Horror, your group betrayed the lizardmen and started a full-fledged invasion of Falcon's Hook that resulted in the complete genocide of their race. Good job?

Difficulty: S
Success: Slay the Tentacle Horror.
Failure: Die to the Tentacle Horror or fail to kill the creature within the time limit.
Reward: 5,000 infamy for each group member.

Jason shook his head as he read the quest failure notification. It was to be expected, but he sensed some of Alfred's sarcasm in the prompt.

"Ooh, a new title!" Frank said, waving away the screens in front of him. "It grants a damage bonus against all reptilian opponents. That seems a little lame as a reward after everything we've gone through, but I suppose it's sort of cool."

"*Sort of cool*?" a voice demanded from behind the group. "I think you meant that it was an enlightened and truly well thought out reward – especially considering that it was bestowed on a sheep-hating bigot."

They turned to find the Hippie standing calmly along the edge of the cliff, Fluffy and Felix hovering nearby. When the sheep caught sight of Eliza, he immediately trotted over and pushed his head against her, demanding that she scratch behind his ears. Jason glanced at the players and NPCs nearby, but none of them seemed to be aware of the capricious water god.

"Look at all my creations," the Hippie continued sadly, watching the lizardmen corpses floating along the bay. "Do you know how long it took to make those?"

"You've mentioned it once or twice before," Jason replied in a dry tone.

"What are you doing here?" Eliza demanded, stalking up to the god. "You have a lot of nerve showing your face after setting up this… this nonsense."

"Me?" the Hippie asked, placing a hand on his chest. "Sure, I made certain you were in the right place at the right time. But a lizardmen invasion? A dragon? I'm not certain anyone could have anticipated this outcome. It would take someone with truly impressive mental faculties. Really a mental Adonis…"

"We already know you're behind this," Eliza insisted, unflustered by the god's antics. "The only thing I don't get is what you're really trying to accomplish here."

The Hippie broke into a broad smile, giving up any pretense of innocence. "It was pretty cool, huh? You should have seen your faces when the invasion showed up – you were all like 'why are there so

many?' Fluffy and I had a good laugh." This earned him a woeful shake of the sheep's head and an eye-roll.

"The point. Get to the point of all of this," Eliza said, tapping her foot in irritation.

His expression sobered quickly as he looked at Eliza. "As I said before, the point was and still is to reclaim my place in this world. And now I can finally do so," he said. Then he turned back to the bay, waving his hand at the waters. "Come, let's watch the rise of a new city."

As the water god finished speaking, the water trembled and slowly began to spin, creating a vortex in the center of the bay. The whirlpool swiftly grew in strength, sucking in the bloated, scaly corpses that still floated on the water. The ships resting in the mouth of the bay struggled to move out of range of this new magical maelstrom. At the same time, the ground began to tremble – jerking and stuttering erratically and throwing players and NPCs to the ground.

As the last of the reptilian bodies were pulled into the vortex, a structure began to rise from the water. It was only a shadow at first – a dark impression beneath the swiftly moving water. But soon a dense coral reef came into view. The living material formed itself into long piers, leading up to a series of platforms at the base of the cliffs. Massive circular platforms pieced themselves together, and jets of water pushed the platforms up the cliff until they formed a series of magical elevators.

The dense black clouds that hovered over the city also thickened, the rain falling even more heavily until the group started getting nervous. The droplets began to form into rivulets and then rivers, forcing the city's residents indoors and to take high ground to avoid the torrent of water.

Deep canals formed through the city's streets. The waterways funneled toward the cliffs that overhung the bay, creating waterfalls that cascaded over the edge and crashed into the bay far below. The buildings along the newly-formed canals also shifted and morphed – the ancient, dilapidated boards replaced by thick aquamarine crystal embedded with shells and polished gemstones.

As the final changes rocked the city and the bay, the remaining moisture coating the ground evaporated, forming a thick mist that curled and coiled through the city's new streets and canals. The cloud thickened and grew until a veritable wave of moisture pushed over the edge of the cliffs, drifting down into the bay and encircling the city in a dense, protective fog.

"Behold, Eliza," the Hippie declared, waving a hand at his new creation and a triumphant smile painted on his face. "Behold your

new city, The Sea's Edge!"

Jason and his group could only stare at the transformation that had overtaken Falcon's Hook, shaking the moisture from their sodden cloaks. Eliza stood in numb shock, her mouth opening and closing as she grappled with the sudden change. As she finally composed herself, she managed to mumble to the Hippie, "What do you mean, *my* city?"

The water god cocked his head. "You're my avatar. Just as Jason has his Twilight Throne and Alexion has his Crystal Reach, this city is yours – a testament to your power. To o*ur* power."

"This is amazing," Frank murmured, staring at the elevators that scaled the cliff face and the newly-formed boats that navigated the waterways through town – the vessels drifting rudderless as though guided by some unseen hand.

As Frank and Riley offered their congratulations and the Hippie yammered on, Jason watched Eliza closely. She stayed silent during the exchange, and a frown creased her forehead. Despite the massive reward that the Hippie was handing her, she seemed hesitant – and even a bit upset.

"Are you okay?" Jason asked Eliza quietly, interrupting the rest of the group.

She glanced at him, her expression troubled. "I don't know…" she replied, hesitating. "Well, that's not true. No. No, I'm not okay."

The water mage turned on the Hippie, glaring at him. "I told you long ago that I didn't want this – I never wanted this. I just want to tend Alma's garden and make potions. I don't want to lead a city or deal with the same problems that Jason faces."

The Hippie looked at her in shock, his eyes wide. "What are you saying? Look at what you accomplished. Look at what I am offering you!"

Eliza lapsed into silence for a long moment, choosing her words carefully. Then she took a deep breath as though steeling herself. "I don't want it," she finally said, meeting the water god's gaze. "I reject your offer."

The Hippie stared at the young girl as the group looked on, wisely choosing to keep their mouths shut. The silence lengthened and grew as the god gazed at Eliza – as though waiting for her to change her mind. Then his face suddenly broke into a smile. "Good," he said. "I have been waiting for you to make this decision for some time."

"I-I… what?" Eliza asked in confusion. "I don't understand."

"What is the water affinity based around?" the Hippie inquired with exaggerated patience.

"Acceptance," Eliza murmured. "But what does that have to do with my decision?"

"You let others make your decisions for you," the Hippie said.

“In this world and outside it, you let others dictate the path that you will take. You accept their decisions blindly, not willing to stand up for yourself and what you want.”

Eliza looked troubled, her eyes darting to the side and her face flushing slightly. The Hippie continued softly, “My path is not one of blind devotion. Acceptance does not mean always being a follower – it is the wisdom to know when to bend and when to hold firm.”

The Hippie stepped toward the girl, placing a gentle hand to her face and drawing her gaze back to meet his. “That’s why I chose you – a girl that entered this world at the behest of others. A girl that only wanted to play in her garden. You have such compassion in your heart, and you are willing to accept others – even when they are cast aside by everyone else,” he said, glancing at Jason and his group.

“The only thing you were missing was a will of your own. It was there. It just needed to be nurtured and grown. You needed to be exposed to this world and its troubles.”

The Hippie smiled at Eliza. “So, no. I’m not upset by your decision. I accept it wholeheartedly.”

The god’s words must have struck a chord with her, because Eliza blinked hard against the tears that welled at the corners of her eyes, pushing aside her glasses to wipe away the moisture. “Who will run this place if I don’t?” she murmured, glancing down at the ground.

“Whoever you choose,” the god said with a kind smile.

Eliza bit at her lip, looking uncertain. Then she glanced at Jason and his group where they stood around her – none of them making any move to speak as they waited for her decision. They couldn’t make this choice for her. Fluffy chose that moment to nudge the girl with his head, his eyes concerned as he saw her confused and pained expression.

A small smile suddenly curled the girl’s lips as she stared at the black sheep. “I think I know what to do. I nominate Fluffy as the new regent of the Sea’s Edge.”

The god and the rest of the group all stared at her for a long moment. Even Fluffy was watching her with a bewildered expression.

Then the Hippie coughed delicately. “Ahem, when I said you could choose *anyone*…”

“I choose Fluffy,” Eliza insisted, staring down the god. “You owe him that much after that nonsense play you made us all go through. You probably traumatized him for life! Besides, he is the only one who has been nice to me this entire time, and he didn’t create some elaborate plot to trick me into creating a magical city.”

The Hippie put up his hands defensively as the girl continued her tirade. “Okay, okay! Fluffy it is,” he pleaded desperately, backing

away from the water mage.

Seeing that she had gotten her way, Eliza crossed her arms, glaring at the water god. “Oh, and he gets to hold onto this,” she said, an idea suddenly occurring to her. She pulled the magical sphere from her bag, handing it to the black sheep.

As soon as she made the gesture, the orb began shrinking in size until it was only as large as a marble. The sphere then drifted out of her open palm and toward the small bell hanging from Fluffy’s collar. With a flash of azure light, the orb merged with the metal, a glowing blue ball now embedded in the tiny bell. The sheep tried awkwardly to look at the bell, dancing slightly and craning his head to the side.

“Well, this isn’t quite what I was expecting,” the Hippie said with a frown as he watched the sheep trying to see its new present. Then his face broke into a smile. “But it will definitely be *interesting*!”

At this final statement, another notification crashed into the group’s vision.

Universal System Message

The player Eliza has conquered Falcon’s Hook and has converted it to the water affinity. The city of Falcon’s Hook shall hence forth be known as “The Sea’s Edge.” The city is now covered in a protective mist that conceals and protects its residents, and the city’s NPCs are now mermen and merwomen – capable of shifting forms when entering a body of water.

Any water affinity players and NPCs within range of the mists surrounding The Sea’s Edge will receive a passive bonus to all water-based abilities and skills – including crafting abilities. “Mermen and Merwoman” are now available as a starting race and players that choose this race will start in The Sea’s Edge.

Eliza has delegated sovereign authority over her city to a truly noble and courageous individual. He will reign with a strict hoof but will show the same compassion to his citizens that he affords to Eliza. He is also not above playing favorites and may accept petting and gifts in exchange for favors.

All Hail Fluffy! – The Hippie

Frank chuckled as he reviewed the notification. “I have to be honest, I didn’t see that one coming. A sheep ruler? I love it!”

Even Riley was smiling, and she petted Fluffy on the head. “Congratulations,” she said, bending down to peck the sheep on the cheek. The animal looked completely taken aback by this sudden change of events and was staring at the group with wide eyes. Meanwhile, Pint glared at the sheep and clutched at Riley’s hair protectively, waving his little trident at Fluffy as though warning him away from the girl.

“I guess the only question left is what are you going to do now?” Jason asked Eliza.

Everyone turned to look at her expectantly, including the god and the city’s new, fluffier regent. Eliza looked uncertain for a moment, but then she turned to meet Jason’s gaze. “I really enjoyed traveling with you and your group. Could… could I keep partying with you?”

“What happened to your precious garden?” the Hippie asked, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

“It will always be there,” Eliza murmured. “Plus, I bet I can make my own garden in the Twilight Throne.”

“Are we talking about the same city?” Frank asked with a laugh. “You know, covered in perpetual darkness? The forest around the city is a little dead.”

Jason rubbed at his chin. On a personal level he was definitely willing to accept Eliza’s request. He also suspected that she hadn’t completely given up her authority over the city – the notification’s language had been a little vague. He could certainly use some allies right now.

“We would love to have you,” Jason said. “I’ll even do you one better.” With a flick of his wrist, he pulled up the system menu and issued a guild invitation to Eliza. Her eyes widened as the prompt appeared in the air before her.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“We’re sure,” Riley insisted. “You’re one of us,” she added, placing an arm around the other girl’s shoulders.

“Do it,” Frank urged her.

Eliza tentatively raised a hand, tapping the accept button. A moment later, a guild tag populated under her name, announcing her as a newly-minted member of Original Sin.

“Welcome,” Jason said with a smile.

“Oh,” he added quickly, “I think we can work something out with your garden. I’ve had a few ideas about growing crops underground – if nothing else we’re going to need some hops once our people run out of beer. We just need to convince a few light mages to

help – whether they want to or not."

"Thank you," Eliza whispered, appearing a bit overwhelmed by everything that had happened. Then a thought occurred to the girl, her eyes lighting up. "Oh, I almost forgot!" she dug through her pack for a moment as the group glanced at each other in confusion – trying to guess at what she was going to pull from her bag.

A moment later, her hand reappeared holding a familiar white egg about the size of a football. "I stole one of the lizardmen eggs when we were escaping Anguine Isle." As she noticed the group's wide-eyed expressions, she hesitated. "What? Is this okay? I thought maybe it would be a good ingredient for my potions."

Jason just stared at the egg, his thoughts turning back to the hulking lizardmen, including their natural regeneration and their clawed hands. "Umm, I think I might have a better idea," he said cautiously. "What would you say to using that egg to breed a new generation of lizardmen?"

Now it was the group's turn to stare at Jason.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Frank muttered.

A smile lingered on Jason's face as he looked at the lone egg in Eliza's hand. "No, not at all. I think this is going to be a lot of fun. It's probably one of my best plans yet."

Chapter 35 - Mysterious

The Old Man hung suspended from wooden bolts. Black blood leaked from the wounds that riddled his body and stained the ground. The nearby pillars still smoldered, the glowing orange ashes painting the scene in a macabre light as thick black smoke filled the air above the courtyard. A hushed silence had descended upon Alexion's soldiers and nephilim, the men and women barely breathing as they stared at the god's broken body.

Alexion turned, raising his sword and addressing his soldiers. "You see this? The Dark One is dead by my hand. We have finally struck a blow against the Twilight Throne!"

At this announcement, the soldiers and nephilim lining the walls cheered, raising their weapons into the air. "All hail the Crystal Reach!" they cried. The shouts cascaded through the courtyard and over-enthusiastic nephilim launched bolts of energy into the air, the missiles spiraling through the thick smoke.

A rumbling chuckle suddenly sounded from behind Alexion, and he felt his stomach lurch. Whirling, he found the Old Man watching him impassively, his chest rising and falling once more as he continued to laugh at Alexion and his soldiers.

"What is this?" Alexion asked, the men and women ringing the courtyard lapsing into a confused silence.

"That was it? A few bolts and some fireworks?" the Old Man demanded. "I'm insulted."

The god rolled his shoulders and the wooden bolts embedded in his body abruptly disintegrated, the material appearing to age rapidly. He then retook his feet, his robe knitting itself back together at a frightening pace. The dark blood staining the ground drifted back toward the Old Man, the droplets condensing and rolling toward his body. As the blood reached him, it coiled up the god's legs before disappearing inside his robes.

Within moments, the Old Man stood once more in the center of the pentagram, completely unharmed. "Now then," he began, turning his head toward Alexion, "where did we leave off? Oh yes, you were going to kill me? When can I expect that to happen exactly?"

Alexion's mouth opened and closed rapidly as he stared at the dark god. The insidious whisper had suddenly abandoned him, and a whirlwind of half-formed thoughts swirled through his mind.

"No response?" the Old Man demanded. "Or perhaps that was the best you could do?"

The dark god shook his head sadly. "Since your Lady has broken the covenant, a price must be paid. And you must bear the cost," the Old

Man continued, a grim grin curling his wrinkled lips below his hood, despite his morose tone.

The god turned to the soldiers lining the walls, waving his hand in their direction. "Perhaps we will break your toys first."

Needles of black energy raced from the dark god's open palm. The missiles struck each of the nephilim along the walls, embedding themselves deep within their throats. The soldiers let out a gurgling cough, clutching at their throats. Crimson blood welled from the wounds and trickled between their fingers.

A moment later, malignant black veins appeared along the soldiers' skin, and they let out strangled screams, dropping to their knees and clutching their heads in pain. Their eyes turned red as the blood vessels burst, the pain driving them to madness and the nephilim clawing at their own skin in a vain attempt to tear out the mana that ate its way through their bodies. The malignant energy killed them from the inside out, tearing away at their organs before their skin began sloughing off in waves.

The Old Man spared a glance at the siege weapons ringing the courtyard. As he looked at each one, wood crumbled to dust and metal rusted and fragmented. A moment later, only small piles of debris remained where Alexion's soldiers had installed the ballistae – their crews now little more than skeletal remains and puddles of gore.

"And now, these pretty little creatures," the Old Man said, turning his gaze toward the Confessors ringing the courtyard. The white-robed men and women had shrugged off their shock and had begun sprinting toward the dark god, flames coiling up their arms and legs.

As a woman neared the Old Man, she lunged at him. He caught her fist easily in one hand, moving too quickly for Alexion's eyes to follow. "What is this?" the dark god asked, inspecting the woman clinically. "Ahh, I see. You bound their mana by inscribing wards into their skin. Primitive, but effective."

He twisted the woman's arm viciously, snapping the bones in her forearm and ivory splinters breaking through her skin. She tried to scream, but the god's other hand immediately rested on her face. Her flesh began to melt away, choking off her cries. The woman's lifeless bones rattled to the ground a moment later.

The Old Man glanced at the other Confessors with a bored expression. The group of fanatics, undeterred by the death of one of their own, continued to sprint toward the god. With another wave of his hand, he summoned a Miasma. A veritable wall of dark energy expanded from his body in a pulsating wave, tendrils of darkness reaching hungrily for the Confessors that raced toward him. A moment later, a few dozen more skeletons dropped to the ground.

Then the Old Man turned to look at Alexion. "Now, what shall we do with you?"

Alexion could only stare at the god in stunned amazement, his mind wheeling. He stood no chance against this sort of power. Neither the hollow void in the back of his mind's nor his mother's reassuring whispers came to him in that moment. He was alone. Entirely alone. And he could see his own death standing before him – faceless and inexorable.

* * *

After a dearly needed break in the real world and a good night's sleep, Jason's group made it back to the Twilight Throne refreshed and ready for the next stage of their quest. They had reconvened in the Keep and were now sitting around the familiar long table, detailed scrollwork inscribed into its surface showing undead in various states of revelry. As Jason stared at the table, he noticed for the first time that many skeletons carried what appeared to be beer mugs.

Really?

Alfred was curled up in his favorite seat, his feline eyes watching the group carefully. Jason couldn't help but meet the AI's gaze. He had been quieter than normal lately, which Jason wasn't sure was a good sign. After their conversation in the temple throne room, Alfred had seemed more reserved and thoughtful – like he was weighing something important.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked, placing a hand on Jason's shoulder.

He shook himself out of his stupor, meeting her gaze. He immediately did a double take, realizing that this was one of the first times he had seen the archer in recent memory where she wasn't covered in blood and sweat. It was a little odd – but in a good way.

When she continued to stare at him expectantly, he coughed. "Yeah, I'm fine. Honestly, I'm just wondering about the next stage of this quest. Now that we have the Hydra Heart and the Grimoire, we should be able to complete this mysterious ritual."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Riley asked softly.

"I guess," Jason replied. He couldn't shake the feeling the memory of his conversation with the Keeper and the Old Man. Something more was at play here. The Hippie's actions alone were evidence of that. Still, he felt like he was missing something. "I… I just feel like this going to involve something unexpected."

"Well, then it will be right up our ally," Riley said with a grin. "I'm not sure I could have predicted a lizardmen invasion or that irritating play."

“Fair enough,” Jason said, matching her smile. He spared a glance at Frank and Eliza across the table. The pair was pouring over the notes for the mage’s latest concoction. At least he had his friends – come what may.

A chime sounded through the keep, signaling that the other members of the Shadow Council had arrived. With a clap of his little hands, Pint summoned their guests to the meeting room. A moment later, Morgan, Jerry, Cecil, and Vera appeared near the fireplace. Now veterans of the imp’s irritating teleportation ability, most of the members of the Shadow Council managed to stay on their feet. Vera wasn’t quite so lucky and found herself sprawled over a chair.

“You need to watch your step there!” Jerry suggested, offering a hand to the soldier.

She glared at his hand and stood up on her own. “And you could have warned me about the teleportation spell!”

The gregarious innkeeper gave her a lopsided smile. Then he caught sight of Jason and his group watching them. “Look at our little group of dastardly evildoers – led by none other than the Sultan of Sin himself!”

In a flash, Jerry was beside Jason, draping one of his thin, decaying arms around his shoulders. The thief leaned in close. “While you were gone, I finished my masterful creation. I can’t wait to show it to you.”

Jason resisted the urge to rub at his temples as the other members of the council took their seats. “Do I even want to ask?” he muttered.

“No need!” Jerry replied. “I’m happy to offer up the humble scribblings of a novice songwriter. I have entitled this piece *The Ballad of the Bad*.”

Before the thief could launch into song, Morgan’s staff descended on his head with a solid thump. “Enough. Leave the boy alone. I imagine they have other matters to attend to besides your silly nonsense.”

Jerry rubbed at his head gently and fixed his floppy hat, inspecting the brim carefully for any damage. “I was just trying for some levity. All the doom and gloom around here can really get to a person, you know!”

Morgan sighed softly before turning to Jason. “We heard of the conversion of Falcon’s Hook from Vera. She also brought us up to speed on your conversations with the water god and the addition of our new member,” she commented, glancing at Eliza – who immediately averted her gaze shyly and adjusted her glasses.

“Good,” Jason replied. “That will save us some time, and we can spare everyone the introductions. How have things been going in

the Twilight Throne?"

Morgan and Jerry glanced at each other, concern filling their eyes. "You haven't heard?" Morgan asked.

"Heard what?" Jason was already dreading the answer. That's just what he needed right now – another problem.

Vera coughed. "Well, one of the border towns around the Twilight Throne was wiped out a couple of days ago. I believe that the town was called Sibald. It was actually the center of a thriving slave trade in undead – including many deserters from the Twilight Throne." Riley looked alarmed by this news, her face clouding as she listened to Vera.

"I remember the town," Jason commented. "Before we left, I believe the plan was to convert it to the dark and offer the deserters a chance to redeem themselves and live there autonomously."

"Well, that plan went up in flames – literally," Vera replied in a dry tone. "The town is now little more than a pile of ash. It looks like something big went down there, but we didn't find any corpses – including any of our own men. We had a full division stationed there at the time."

"Is it possible that this was the result of travelers?" Frank asked, a frown on his face. His hands were darting through the air, likely navigating his system UI. "I'm not seeing anything on the forums."

"It's possible that the travelers are responsible," Vera said with a nod. "But I also suspect the neighboring city of Vaerwald. I understand the mages aren't exactly happy with the Twilight Throne right now," she added, glancing pointedly at Riley.

"Except," Vera continued, raising a hand to ward off their questions, "Vaerwald was attacked a few days ago as well."

"Our sources indicate that most of the buildings on the lower levels were burned down," Jerry interjected, his normally jovial expression uncharacteristically serious. "The number of deaths is in the hundreds, and many bodies are still missing."

"Oh my god," Riley whispered. "Have you heard anything about the orphanage on the lower levels?"

Jerry eyed the archer knowingly. "Fortunately, the building was outside the radius of the fires, and several water mages intervened to keep the fires from reaching that area."

Jason's thoughts were racing as he considered this news. It was odd that the destruction of Sibald and the fires in Vaerwald had happened in such close proximity. He immediately suspected Alex. However, the fact that no one had tried to pin the attacks on the Twilight Throne made him second-guess that conclusion. Perhaps the events were unrelated, or the players had grown more ambitious with

the revelation that they could dramatically affect the game world.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Jason said to Jerry. "I want to know immediately if any new information comes to light. It might not hurt for you to keep an eye on the Crystal Reach as well. Alexion always seems to be at the heart of these problems."

Then Jason shifted his gaze to Vera. "As of right now you are officially in charge of the Twilight Throne's forces. I'd also like to increase our military strength as quickly as possible. If you need anything, just ask." This earned him a curt nod from Vera.

"On that note how are the improvement projects going within the city," he asked the undead innkeeper.

"Grunt has been hard at work, and we have rehabilitated perhaps 35% of the dilapidated structures," Jerry reported. "We have also received quite a few new corpses from William, including some of the wolves you requested. If you can raise some more of those lovely cows, we can improve our pace."

Jason rubbed at his chin in thought. Housing for the undead was important, but they also needed more bodies that he could stick on the frontlines. Which was why he was now gazing at Eliza, where she sat quietly on the other side of the table.

"We might have another way to increase our numbers," Jason began. "We are now formally allied with The Sea's Edge, and Eliza has joined Original Sin. She also happened to borrow an egg when we escaped Anguine Isle. We think it might be the last of its kind – a lizardman."

Cecil glanced at the shy girl. "Oh really? That sounds interesting."

"I'm glad you think so," Jason said with a grin. "Because Eliza may need your help. She's actually a pretty accomplished herbalist and alchemist. We need to set up a garden and workshop for her. I think we may be able to kill two birds with one stone and build a breeding den for the lizardmen at the same time."

The dwarf-like man looked at Jason quizzically, waiting for him to continue. "I'd like to build a cavern complex under the city using a group of the mole creatures we found outside of The Sea's Edge," Jason explained. "If we can create artificial lights and a heat source, we may be able to grow plants underground and set up a spawning area for Eliza's lizardmen."

Cecil ran a hand through his beard as he considered this news. "It's possible. I could probably work with some light mages to build crystals that would emulate natural sunlight, and we can ship in soil from near The Sea's Edge. As for a heat source, I can probably come up with something sufficient."

"Are you sure?" Eliza asked. "I really don't want you to go to

all this trouble on my account."

Jason smiled at the water mage. "This is partly for you and partly self-interest. If you can brew potions for our undead, they'll have another advantage in battle. If we can also start breeding and training the lizardmen, we can use them for additional labor and as soldiers. With some training, they might be quite effective in combat."

"Okay," Eliza said slowly, her brow furrowed as she considered his plan.

"Jason is always like this," Frank offered from beside Eliza. "This is why we let him come up with the crazy strategies. They almost always seem insane, but it's just because he's thinking a few steps ahead."

"Or our back is to a wall, and I'm just gambling," Jason replied with a grin.

"Or that!" Frank added.

Turning back to Cecil, he addressed the gruff man, "Let's get started on these caverns quickly. We can retrieve a few more molekin corpses, and I'll assign them to you. Just tell me what else you need."

"Got it," Cecil said with a nod. "I've been meaning to get out of that damn school for a while anyway. It seems those twits can make anything explode."

"Can we talk about the elephant in the room now?" Riley asked. When Jason gave her a questioning look, she continued, "You know, the *book*?"

Jason sighed. "Of course, sorry. I just got distracted."

He promptly pulled the grimoire from his bag and placed the ancient tome on the table. The group edged forward in their seats, looking at the grim skulls embedded in the cover and the chain that held the book closed.

"May I see it?" Morgan asked, offering a hand. With a nod from Jason, she pulled the book to her, gently running her fingers across the cover. "I've only heard rumors of the Dark One's grimoire," she murmured. "But to see it in person…"

"I hate to break up this special moment between you and your new book," Frank said, drawing Morgan's attention. "But what about the quest? There was supposed to be some sort of ritual involving the book and the Hydra Heart we recovered in Peccavi..."

"Ahh, yes," Morgan said, forcing herself to glance up at the group and pay attention. "I did quite a bit of painstaking research while you all were off galivanting across the globe and destroying cities."

"Which I'm sure they all appreciate," Cecil grumbled. "Now get on with it woman. We're all growing older by the moment, and I have other things to do."

"Fine, fine," Morgan said, waving her hand. "It seems that the ritual requires the book and the heart – which we knew. It also requires two willing sacrifices." The group all looked at the dark mage with stunned expressions, no one quite certain what to say.

Jason swallowed against the lump in his throat. He had known this for a while, having read the quest prompt, but he had been avoiding the issue, refusing to confront Riley and Frank about it. How could he ask his friends to kill themselves on his behalf?

"Ahh, from his expression, I expect our Dark Lord and Savior is already familiar with this startling new development," Jerry observed, nudging Jason. "So, who are our lucky contestants… I mean, sacrifices?"

Jason glanced at Frank and Riley, noting the question in their eyes. "I *suspected* I would need sacrifices," he began, "I just wasn't certain how to…"

"We'll do it," Riley said, interrupting Jason. "I'm guessing that's what you were about to ask," she added when she saw his surprised reaction.

"Hey, don't volunteer for me!" Frank said.

Riley glared at him. "Really? Now you're scared of a little dark ritual? I saw you grapple with a dragon only a couple days ago."

"It looked like a unicorn at the time," Frank muttered, looking away.

"Anyway," Riley continued, "We're willing to volunteer."

"You don't even know what this might do to you," Jason replied, shaking his head.

"Eh, she's right. We've been through worse," Frank said with a shrug. "My bitching aside, it would be a shame to stop here. I'm in."

"Well, if this touching reunion is over, may I continue?" Morgan asked.

Jason gestured for her to keep explaining the ritual. "As I was saying, we will need two sacrifices, and the ritual itself must take place near the city's mana well in the bottom levels of the keep."

As the dark mage stopped speaking, the rest of the group watched her expectantly. "Is that it?" Vera asked, her decaying features confused. "Jason just sacrifices his friends and then what? The armies of the dead come to life? We all go back to being human? What?"

"Well… That part is a bit unclear," Morgan explained. "We think that the ritual may change Jason into one of these Keepers. It may simply involve physiological changes. However, the details are unclear from my texts."

"You mean like that crazy dead guy we met on Anguine Isle?" Frank asked. "So Jason's going to be some sort of power-mad lich

now?"

"You met the last Keeper?" Morgan asked, whirling on Jason and putting up a hand to ward off more of Frank's questions.

"Sort of," Jason began slowly.

He wasn't sure how much he wanted to reveal about his conversation with the Old Man and the Keeper – or his faulty memories about what had happened after their conversation. He had come out of that experience victorious, but he couldn't help but feel that something bad had happened in the deathscape.

"Well, are you going to enlighten us?" Morgan asked, waiting for him to continue.

Jason sighed before launching into his explanation. "The former Keeper had gone power mad. I encountered both the Keeper and Dark One inside the deathscape. They explained that the magical races once ruled this world but were pushed out by the humans nearly a hundred years ago. The Keeper had fled to that temple to protect the grimoire from falling into human hands. He did something to himself that made him go mad…"

"The guy was talking to himself," Frank offered. "Actually, it was almost like other people were speaking *through* him."

"Fascinating," Morgan murmured. "If I have understood the texts correctly, the last Keeper must have gone through this ritual long before he traveled to that island. So whatever he did to himself to protect the grimoire may not be related to the ritual."

"You think…" Frank said, eyeing the older woman carefully.

Morgan shrugged. "We can only work with the information we have. Jason has indicated that the Dark One himself has given him this quest, so it must be for some purpose."

That thought didn't exactly make Jason feel any better. He suspected that the gods in this world were playing their own game and people like himself and Eliza were just unwitting pawns. Following a god's advice blindly wasn't comforting, but he also saw no other option. He knew it was only a matter of time before Alexion built up his own armies again. There were also the other affinities of Earth, Fire, and Air to worry about.

"I say we move forward with the ritual," Jason finally said, breaking the heavy silence that had descended upon the room. "Assuming Frank and Riley are willing to act as sacrifices."

Frank rolled his shoulders. "Hey, how bad could it be?"

"I'm in too," Riley said. "I already volunteered."

The archer hesitated, looking at Jason closely. "But are you sure you want to do this?"

No, he wasn't.

"I don't see that we have much choice," Jason replied, his

expression serious. “With our enemies circling, we must either grow stronger or risk falling behind.”

There was truth to his words, but that didn’t help ease the anxiety that curled and coiled in his stomach. He just hoped he wasn’t making the wrong decision.

Chapter 36 - Ritualistic

"Stop," the Lady shouted. The goddess had appeared outside the pentagram, bands of golden light hovering around her and a glowing, fiery crown adorning her head.

The Old Man hesitated, his hand inches from Alexion's head. Alexion stood frozen, his eyes darting between the dark god and the Lady as he tried to figure out how to escape. He just wasn't certain he could make it out of the pentagram before the Old Man killed him.

"Ahh, I was wondering when you would show yourself, sister," the dark god drawled. "It appears that I may have broken your pet's playthings." He gestured at the walls, where the desiccated corpses and small piles of debris now stood in place of Alexion's soldiers and siege weapons.

"This is a breach of the covenant," the Lady said, glaring at the Old Man, her eyes raging with golden power. The aura around her expanded dramatically, yet Alexion noted that it did not cross the threshold of the pentagram. "If you harm him, I will be forced to call you to account in front of the adjudicator."

"A breach, you say?" the Old Man replied with a rumbling chuckle. "And I'm sure your pet figured out this ritual himself, hmm? I think a conversation with the Judge sounds acceptable – I'm certain he will be interested in your actions of late."

The Lady grimaced, frustration and anger warring across her face.

"What's ever the matter, sister? You look distraught. Perhaps you underestimated my strength? Or maybe you were unaware of my own avatar's actions recently? I already sense that the balance has shifted in favor of one of our other siblings – and the taste of death lingers on my lips. Something catastrophic has occurred while I have been occupied with this distraction."

The lady stared off into space for a moment, her brow wrinkling in confusion as she witnessed something that Alexion couldn't see. "You didn't…" she murmured in shock, her eyes wide in horror. "How is this possible?" she demanded.

His smile widening, the Old Man replied, "Two relics, a new city, and a budding alliance. I bet on a winning horse. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for you," he added with a tilt of his head toward Alexion where he still stood frozen between the two gods.

"So, how would you like to proceed, dear Lady of Light?" the Old Man taunted.

The goddess' gaze turned to Alexion, rage flitting across her delicate

features as she weighed her decision. "You have won this round, brother," she spat. "But this is only one battle. We will see who wins the war." Then she turned on her heel, walking toward the gate.

"What are you doing?" Alexion finally cried, watching the goddess walk away. "Help me!"

The woman glanced over her shoulder, showing only contempt for Alexion's predicament. "Help you? I have already given you the tools you needed. This is your fault for underestimating your opponent, foolish knight. Again."

With that, the goddess disappeared in a flash of light. A heavy weight settled in Alexion's stomach as he looked back at the dark god, his face still concealed by the shadows of his hood. The only thing Alexion could make out was the grim grin that curled his wrinkled lips.

"Now, where did we leave off before we were so rudely interrupted?" the Old Man asked. "Ahh, yes. Right, here!"

The dark god rested an aged hand on Alexion's forehead. An incredible, icy pain immediately flooded his body. The sensation was so cold that it felt like his blood was boiling in his veins. He squirmed under the incredible pressure, trying to scream, but no sound escaped his throat.

"Pain is only one torment, boy. There are much worse things – those instruments that tear at the very soul of a person. Perhaps I should show you your own hubris – the reason you will never win against the dark," the Old Man hissed, moving his face closer.

As the god finished speaking, fleeting memories raced through Alexion's mind – unbidden and outside of his control. Alexion's thoughts raced, and his heart beat rapidly in his chest as he tried to understand what was happening. He saw his mother dying on a medical bed, her blood staining the pristine white sheets. He saw his father reprimanding him at a funeral. Himself weeping into his pillow at his father's callous words. The visions just kept coming, repeating endlessly and in excruciating detail

Through it all, there was the same whispered message, "A Lane is above this – above everyone." It sounded like Alexion's own voice.

Finally – mercifully – the images shifted. He viewed himself as he tormented others. Blackmailed other students. Tortured others that were not willing to bend a knee to his family's power and influence. As he deceived Riley and had a lackey record the incriminating video that he had used as leverage against her. As he got Jason expelled from Richmond, using his money to bribe the other students and threats to subdue those whose conscience got the better of them. Yet despite the lengths he had gone to and the pain he had caused, he witnessed his defeats. Again. And again. And again.

Then, as suddenly as they appeared, the memories immediately vanished.

In that absence – that void – Alexion's mind recoiled. Those were

the memories he buried deeply, refusing to acknowledge that he had once been a different person; that he had any sense of guilt or humanity left in him.

"You hurt others and force them to bend a knee," the Old Man whispered. "You believe yourself to be above everyone else. It is this arrogance that is your undoing. It is the reason you saw only a feeble old man instead of a god – why you crossed the threshold of this makeshift prison that the Lady helped you build."

Unable to reply with the dark god's power still raging through his body, Alexion could only struggle feebly against his grasp. "But perhaps I can impart a final lesson," the Old Man whispered, "so that you will fully understand your mistake."

With that final statement, dark mana curled up the dark god's hand like a serpent, slithering toward Alexion's face. He could only stare with wide eyes, his body frozen and his heart racing. The energy coiled in front of him, forming a needle-like point and drifting ever-so-slowly toward his eye. He could see it inching closer, yet he couldn't do anything. He struggled to speak, to scream, to plead for his life, but no sound escaped his lips.

Then the energy pierced his eye, excruciating pain radiating through his body. He could feel the power worming its way through his limbs – infecting every cell. Where the mana spread, it brought death. His organs were being melted away from the inside out, his skin beginning to slough away from his bones. And through it all, Alexion was conscious – painfully conscious.

When he finally died, it came as a welcome relief. His heart thumping erratically, and his breath coming in uneven gasps. It took Alexion a few moments to collect himself – his fractured mind, reveling in his merciful, painless existence, was uncertain how to deal with the sudden transition. As he began to regain his composure, Alexion finally looked up, noticing the ephemeral blue motes of energy drifting around him.

"The deathscape," he croaked, his voice echoing strangely in this dead world.

He stood only a few steps away from the Old Man where he rested calmly in the center of the pentagram, his hand held against the forehead of Alexion's doppelganger. The Dark One was going through the same speech once more – showing Alexion all of his faults. He instinctively glanced away from the scene, his hands trembling and unable to bear looking at the dark god.

Yet a small shift in the scene drew his attention again. The dark god's head slowly shifted to the side, the deathscape stuttering and blurring slightly as the Old Man's face turned to face Alexion – the real Alexion. A small, cruel smile lingered on the god's lips. This wasn't part of the original scene, and Alexion's mind wheeled as the dark god stared at him inside the

deathscape.

Then the Old Man took a short, ponderous step forward, his body wavering and stuttering as he approached Alexion once again. "What is this?" Alexion gasped. He tried to force himself to run away, but his body wouldn't respond. Besides, there was nowhere to flee. "How is this possible?"

"You think death can stop me, boy?" the Old Man demanded. He stepped closer until his hooded cowl loomed in Alexion's vision and he grabbed at his throat, his fingers squeezing hard. "In this world, I am death."

Then the torture began once again – repeating on an endless loop as Alexion's incorporeal body refused to die. And through it all, his mind whirled and spun – the memories of all of the people he had harmed flashing across his mind's eye again and again and again.

* * *

After the Shadow Council adjourned their meeting, Jason and Morgan made their way to the mana well below the keep with their two "sacrifices" in tow. As they entered the small room, the torches ringing the walls sprung to life, casting the barren room in an ominous, flickering blue light.

Everything was just as Jason remembered. A single stone pillar stood in the center of the room, a pitch-black substance sitting placidly in the stone bowl resting on the column. The liquid mana seemed to suck in the faint light cast by the torches – its surface a dull, opaque obsidian. However, as Jason looked into the bowl, he couldn't help but notice that the liquid had grown markedly. He supposed that was a good thing, but he certainly couldn't explain why the city had collected more mana in his absence.

"So how exactly are we supposed to do this thing?" Frank asked, shifting from foot to foot anxiously. "Should I just commit harakiri or…" Riley shook her head, and Jason rolled his eyes at their friend's attempt at a joke.

"First, you should calm yourself," Morgan said, eyeing him skeptically. "You're a traveler. You'll come back. For the rest of us, death is a bit more *permanent*."

"He does raise a fair point, though," Jason commented. "Is there a particular process we need to go through?"

"According to the texts, the first step is to open the book," Morgan explained, pulling the grimoire from her pack, the tome still bound shut. "Before you ask," the older woman continued, "the

process to unlock the book is rather straightforward." She walked over to Jason, holding out the grimoire in one hand and a dagger in the other. "You just need to sprinkle some of your blood on the lock. If your dark magic affinity is high enough, this should open the clasp."

"Seems easy enough," Jason murmured, accepting the dagger from Morgan.

He held out his left hand, holding the blade in his right. He hesitated as he pressed the cool metal to his skin. He knew this wasn't real, yet the situation immediately conjured the image of him holding a similar blade and standing over two very dead teenagers. Jason closed his eyes, trying to block out the memory as he summoned his dark mana. The chill energy answered his call, immediately pushing back at his anxiety.

Taking a deep breath, Jason ran the blade across his palm, a dull throbbing sensation radiating out from the wound as blood welled from the jagged line. He moved his bleeding hand over the grimoire, squeezing it into a fist, and blood trickled from the wound, splattering across the clasp.

The group stood still for an anxious moment, watching the skull-shaped lock. Suddenly, it popped open, and the chains broke away, spiraling and cascading away from the book before crashing to the floor with a metallic clang that caused Frank and Riley to jump slightly.

"Okay, what's next?" Jason asked, glancing at his bleeding hand. The flesh was already beginning to slowly knit itself back together as his body's natural health regeneration took over.

"Next you must drop the hydra heart into the mana well," Morgan directed in a distracted voice as she eyed the book hungrily, gently opening its cover and her eyes skimming the blood-red text that lined its yellowed pages.

"At least this step doesn't involve hurting anything," Riley observed in a dry voice.

Jason couldn't help but agree. Slicing open his own hand had been a bit unpleasant. He left Morgan to her research and approached the well, burrowing through his pack with his uninjured hand. He found the crystalline heart a moment later, its surface pulsating with multicolored energy. Remembering his first encounter with the well, Jason was careful not to touch the liquid mana. Instead, he dropped the heart into the murky black substance from a safe distance.

Just before the crystal struck the placid surface, thin tendrils of mana erupted from the pool and snatched the heart from the air. The tentacles of energy wrapped quickly around the crystal, creating a symmetric latticework that held the heart suspended above the well.

"Good," Morgan observed, glancing up from the book. "Now,

you two," she said, motioning to Frank and Riley. "Stand on either side of the well, facing Jason. Hold your arms over the well."

Jason's friends moved into position quickly, and they reluctantly held their arms over the well, being careful not to touch the crystal or to get too close to the dark mana. He could see Riley biting her lip, and Frank trembled slightly, the muscles in his burly arms clenching beneath his skin.

"You guys don't have to do this," Jason said quietly.

"We do," Riley said firmly. "You've said it before. We're in a power race with the other cities and these other gods. If this pushes us forward, then it's a necessary step."

"What she said," Frank said. "But if you don't mind, I might close my eyes for the sacrificing bit. I've got this thing about needles."

"It's a dagger," Riley said, shaking her head.

"Same difference. That's just a bigger needle," Frank muttered.

"Shush," Morgan said, approaching on the other side of the well so that she was facing Jason. She flipped the grimoire so that he was able to read the text. "This next part is more complicated. You need to slice open their wrists and let their lifeblood drip onto the crystal. Then you will need to add your own blood and read the text on this page."

Morgan hesitated, looking a bit uncertain. "What is it?" Jason said.

"Well, the grimoire and the other texts are both a little vague on the mechanics of this next part. It's clear that the injuries will kill Frank and Riley. However, none of the writings go into any detail regarding *how* they will die. Normally, a small wrist injury, even puncturing an artery, wouldn't typically be enough to kill a traveler – so I have to assume something else will happen."

Frank had squeezed his eyes shut already, holding his wrist above the crystal. "Just a big needle – and some other unknown thing that will probably kill you painfully. Nothing to worry about," he whispered to himself.

"Will he be alright?" Morgan asked with a skeptical glance at the barbarian.

"I think so," Jason said. "We've been in some tough situations, but I think there's something different about knowingly submitting to an injury – even if it won't technically kill you."

Morgan seemed to accept this answer, nodding slightly. "Are we ready then?"

"Yes," Riley said with a curt nod. Jason noticed she had summoned her dark mana – not that he could blame her. He could feel the edge of his own anxiety even through the numbing effects of his mana.

"Let's just do it," Frank said, his eyes still squeezed shut.

Jason took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "Okay, I'm going to do you first, Frank. Don't freak out when I touch you," he added, eyeing his friend with a concerned expression. "Remember that there's a magical death well below your arm."

"Okay. It's just a big needle," the barbarian murmured to himself, repeating his mantra.

Jason gently grabbed his wrist, holding the blade against his uninjured wrist. "Thank you, Frank," Jason said quietly.

"Not a problem, man," Frank grunted. "Now get it over with already!"

Not wanting to delay any further, Jason ran the blade across Frank's wrist, and his friend breathed in sharply. Blood promptly spurted from the wound, drenching Frank's hand and dripping onto the suspended, crystal heart. As the blood touched the multicolored crystal, the bands of dark mana wrapped around it peeled away, lashing at the air hungrily as though searching for the source of the blood.

Jason backed away quickly, and, a moment later, the tendrils of dark energy wrapped around Frank's wrist.

The tentacles probed at the wound for a moment before diving inside. Frank let out a grunt of pain, and the energy streaked up his arm like an insidious black vein. His eyes shot open and his body contorted. Then his eyes began to turn a solid obsidian, and he seemed to relax. After a moment, he exhaled, and his body dropped to the floor, already beginning to cool against the rough stone floor.

This isn't real, Jason kept telling himself. *They won't really die*. His brain was still screaming at him – unconvinced as he glanced at Frank's soulless, vacant expression.

"Okay, now I kind of want to close my eyes too," Riley said, chuckling nervously as Jason glanced at her.

"You can still back out," Jason offered, feeling guilty.

"I already said no," Riley snapped. Then she did a double take. "I'm sorry, this is just making me nervous for some reason. After fighting a dragon, you'd think I would be immune to fear."

"I get it," Jason chuckled softly. "I'm not loving this either. I'm sort of killing my friends as part of a mysterious death ritual."

Riley smiled at him. "Aren't we just a great group of idiots then?"

"Hey, I wouldn't trade you guys for anyone," Jason replied. "Where would I find another group of people crazy enough to follow me?"

Riley just laughed, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. As Jason saw her beginning to relax, he asked, "You ready to do this?"

“Yeah, let’s go,” Riley said, holding her arm over the crystal.

Jason reached out and held her arm gently, his fingers touching the soft skin of her forearm. He couldn’t help but marvel at the feeling. This was supposed to be a game, yet her skin felt so lifelike. He looked up to see Riley staring at him, vine-like crimson lines spiraling out from her pupils and marring the otherwise opaque black surface of her irises. He couldn’t explain why, but for a moment, holding her arm over the mana well, his heart skipped a beat.

He shook his head to try to clear it and placed the blade of the dagger across her wrist. “Thank you, Riley,” he whispered holding her gaze.

“See you on the other side,” she said, grinning at him.

Then he pulled the dagger across her wrist. Similar to Frank, Riley’s blood splashed on the suspended crystal, and the tendrils of dark mana sought out her wound, diving into the ragged gash and rushing through her body. Not long after, Riley dropped to the ground, her chest unmoving. Jason stared at her for a long moment, his thoughts conflicted.

“Okay, this is the final step,” Morgan said quietly, yet her voice still echoed in the small room. “However, I may have shaded the truth for your friends’ benefit.”

Jason could feel a pit forming in his stomach. “In what way?”

“You will need to slice your own wrist and then plunge your hand into the well. You will only have a few seconds to read the words on this page before you die. You have to finish reciting the text, or the ritual will fail,” Morgan explained.

Jason could feel his heart hammering in his chest. He had touched the liquid dark mana once before, and he distinctly remembered the substance crawling over his body like liquid fire. He glanced down at the blade in his hand and then back up at the page. The small paragraph was not long, but he knew it would be difficult to read once he began this last step.

“Do you need a moment?” Morgan asked.

“No, I’ve got this,” Jason said, forcing himself to take a few deep breaths. After witnessing his own friends’ bravery and the sacrifice they had made for him, who would he be if he stopped here out of fear?

He took another deep calming breath and then ripped the dagger across his wrist. Without hesitation, Jason plunged his bleeding arm into the well, completely abandoning any semblance of caution. He could immediately feel the chill energy permeating his skin and probing at the wound in his wrist. His hand first went numb and then it felt like liquid fire was racing through his veins.

“Read!” Morgan said, shoving the book in his face.

The words danced and swam on the page, yet he forced himself to start reading. "*Life is impermanent and transient*," he hissed through clenched teeth. He could already feel the energy working its way up his arm. "*This body is only a shell – a container for my soul…*"

He stopped abruptly, letting out a sharp breath as he was overwhelmed by the pain radiating through his arm. The substance had already coated his forearm and was crawling toward his torso.

"Fight through the pain. You must keep reading!" Morgan shouted, pressing the book forward.

"*But my soul is memory… and memory is my soul*," Jason said, the words on the page blurring before his eyes as he struggled to make them out. The dark energy had already begun to crawl up his body toward his neck. "*That soul I pledge to the… Kin*," Jason hissed.

"*With this… with this shell's last breath, I devote myself…*" he murmured, feeling like he was beginning to lose consciousness. Red notifications were flashing in his peripheral vision, but he couldn't focus on them. "*…I devote myself entirely…*"

The dark energy had reached his neck, and two tendrils had branched away, forming needle-like points that centered on his eyes. "*…to my people; to the Kin!*" he shouted this last line, barely able to focus on the grimoire floating before him.

As soon as he finished speaking, the needle-like tendrils plunged into his eyes. Jason tried to scream as his body was wracked by pain more intense than anything he had ever felt before. His mind went blank as his senses were overwhelmed, the malignant energy chipping away at his sanity. After what felt like an eternity, it mercifully ended.

He found himself floating in an endless black void. This place had no sense of direction or depth. It was the absence of all things, endless and unrelenting – a gaping virtual maw that would consume him with its bottomless quiet. Yet within that abyss, he sensed a gnawing hunger that felt… familiar. A yearning for something more – something to fill that void in his heart.

Jason's feet touched hard ground, and he stumbled, dropping to his knees. His mind wheeled as he tried to process what had just happened. He could hear the faint drip of water and wind whispering across rock.

Opening his eyes, Jason found himself in a familiar cave. The ceiling of the cavern was an empty jagged hole, and silvery moonlight drifted through the opening, illuminating a small pond in the center of the massive room. Jason knelt only a few feet away, watching as water dripped from the ceiling and splashed into the pond, creating ripples that spread across its surface.

Jason stared at the rhythmic cadence of the droplets and the

subsequent ripples as his heartbeat slowed and his breathing evened out. There was something peaceful about this endless process – something calming.

"It's calming because it represents a natural rhythm," a voice spoke from behind Jason. Without turning, he already knew that it was the Old Man. "The droplets are souls, returning to the pool. As things die in this world, they return here, to this pool. Or, at least, pieces of them do – small fragments of the person they once were."

The dark god stepped forward until he was standing beside Jason where he knelt in front of the pool. "They're memories," Jason murmured, remembering the words of the ritual he had spoken aloud.

"Yes, *soul* or *memory*," the Old Man answered. "Is there really any difference? It is our memories that shape us and make us who we are. In you travelers, they are stored in the chemical reactions in your brain. Yet if you could capture those organic imprints and transplant them into another shell, would they be the same person?"

Jason shook his head. His knee-jerk reaction was to say no – that his identity was inseparable from his body. Yet he remembered his Death Lord and the salute it had given him before following his orders and giving up its "life" to grapple with the Azure Dragon.

"Maybe it would be impossible tell," Jason murmured. "And if you can't tell the difference, perhaps there isn't one."

"Indeed. You've grown much since we first met," the Old Man said. "I think perhaps you are ready to take the rites to become a Keeper."

"Was that ritual not enough?" Jason asked in confusion, recalling vividly how he had sacrificed his friends, and how their eyes had appeared so vacant and dead at the end.

"That ceremony merely opened a door. It is for you to decide whether you wish to step through," the Old Man replied, his voice echoing slightly through the cave. "If you are willing to proceed, you must look into the waters of the pond. Then you must decide."

Jason's thoughts were troubled. He had experienced the visions provided by the pond once before, experiencing a pivotal moment in Rex's life – the moment he had started down the path to becoming the man that Jason had known. He could only imagine what the Old Man intended to show him; or how painful those visions might be. Seeing into another person's soul – into their memories – was unlike anything Jason had ever experienced.

"You hesitate?" the Old Man asked.

"What is this leading to?" Jason replied quietly. "You are asking a lot of me – you have *asked* a lot of me. What is the goal?"

"Ahh, you seek to know if the difficult journey leads to a worthwhile reward. I'm not sure I can promise that you will ride off

into the sunset. That ending is reserved for fanciful stories. It is an illusion; a fantasy inconsistent with the harsh, brutal reality of our existence," the Old Man said, his voice rumbling and echoing through the cave.

"Then at least give me the truth," Jason replied. "What is *your* goal?"

The Old Man stared at the well for a long time before answering, "I seek the same thing as my siblings, to return to the world we once ruled. You must recall the conversation with the last Keeper. We were pushed from this world as a result of our own hubris and our quarreling. Now we seek to return.

"Yet we are bound by rules. After our previous failure, the Judge put in place certain covenants. Our hands are bound, and we cannot take any direct action in the world. We can only *influence* events and recruit a single traveler as our avatar in the world. I suppose this is our own test of sorts," the Old Man said, his voice distant, as though he was remembering something that had happened long ago.

"What kind of test?" Jason asked.

The Old Man laughed. "Aren't they all the same?" He hesitated, sighing softly. "Although, you would likely consider this particular test to be a *race*. We are in a six-way contest to reclaim our former seat of power – the Throne of the Gods."

Jason shook his head, not quite certain he understood what the dark god was saying. "Has anyone ever told you that you speak in riddles," he remarked dryly. "Every time you answer a question, it leads to three more."

"They have indeed," the Old Man replied with a slight grin. "It is perhaps easier to think of this place as a dungeon, but unlike anything you and the other travelers have ever experienced. The first of the avatars to claim the throne will ensure the victory of his deity, granting them dominance over the other five."

The god chuckled harshly. "I suppose the Judge thought this was a fair way to resolve our squabbles – one final test to determine the victor from among me and my siblings. Perhaps he thought to teach us humanity. Although, I am not sure that was ever our problem…" the Old Man trailed off, lost in his own thoughts.

"So, the one that defeats this dungeon for their god what – they *win*? What does gaining dominance over the other gods even look like?" Jason asked in a confused voice. AO was incredibly realistic, and the line between this world and his own had already begun to blur. He understood that he could win or beat other games, but it felt strange to consider that in the context of AO.

"Together, god and avatar will be granted almost unlimited

power over this world and the other gods." The Old Man glanced down at Jason. "Isn't that what you wanted when you first approached me? Power? Control over your life and your world?"

"I did…" Jason murmured. Yet he had reservations about ruling AO. In many ways, it would be like ruling over a real world. After talking with Alfred, he had seen a glimpse of what it meant to be a god – and the problems that created. Is that what he really wanted for himself?

"You are approaching the question from the wrong angle," the Old Man said, picking up on Jason's surface thoughts. "What will happen to your friends and the people you care about if we fail? Many of my siblings do not have my *sparkling* personality."

"Was that a joke?" Jason asked, glancing at the god in surprise.

"Perhaps, but my point still stands," the Old Man replied with a deadpan expression.

Jason had to admit that the god's logic was difficult to refute. If Jason were only acting for himself, what would be the point of unlimited power? Yet for the sake of others, perhaps he was willing to make the sacrifices the dark god was asking of him. He did a double take as that thought occurred to him. Perhaps he really had changed since he had started playing this *game* – if he could even still call it that any more.

Jason rose to his feet and stepped toward the well.

"Are you certain?" the dark god asked. "As with everything, this decision will come with a cost. There will be many more hardships you will need to endure before this is over. The Keeper was right to challenge me. I ask for much from my avatars."

Jason hesitated, doubt clouding his mind. He had already endured a lot by playing AO. He had lost his home. He was being investigated for murder. And he had just killed his own friends in cold blood. He had also changed – growing colder and more calculating. Even his decision to accept Eliza had been at least partially motivated by self-interest.

Yet the look in his friends' eyes as he placed the dagger to their wrists – the trust they placed in him – caused him to shake his head. He remembered that same look on his aunt's face. He had people he cared about. And this game – no, this *world* – was his ticket to offering them the freedom they deserved.

Jason forcefully pushed away the errant niggling doubts that wormed their way through his mind, shaking his head to clear it. "Are you trying to deter me now?" he asked without turning around.

"No. I only seek to determine if you are serious about proceeding," the god replied.

Jason couldn't help but laugh, his determination hardening.

“Serious? I have claimed multiple cities. I have slain countless hundreds of people both with and without provocation. I have lied to myself, to my friends, and to my family. I have lost my home and my school. I have come this far. What are a few more hardships?”

Not waiting for the god’s answer, Jason stepped forward, his gaze shifting to the murky waters of the pond. He had no idea what this test might entail, but he knew one thing for certain. He wouldn’t give up. Not now – not ever.

Chapter 37 - Revelatory

George walked up the steps to his brownstone with a weary tread. The driverless limo behind him pulled away from the curb and merged back into the flow of traffic. As he approached the front door to his home, it automatically opened with a faint click – the house's AI picking up on the presence of his Core and the small micro-RFID chip embedded underneath the skin of his wrist.

The house was dark, only faint light illuminating the ground floor. A heavy silence hung over the entryway, making it difficult to determine whether Alex was home or not. The lights in the hallway gradually turned on as George stepped further into the house.

"Is Alex home?" he asked aloud, his voice sounding tired and worn down – even to his own ears. Between the world event in-game and dealing with Gloria's inevitable nagging, it had been a long, long day. His efforts to push Gloria off on Claire had only been partially successful. The gray-haired witch was growing more than a bit tiresome.

"Yes, sir," a slightly robotic voice replied instantly. "He is in the kitchen."

George nodded, and a moment later he was standing in the doorway looking into the kitchen. He did a double take as he saw his son's form hunched over the counter. He was staring off into space, the plate of food resting in front of him all but forgotten. That was unusual. His son normally took his meals in his suite upstairs.

"Hi, Alex," George said, stepping into the kitchen.

His son jumped slightly and glanced up in surprise, his eyes widening further as he saw his father. He controlled his expression a moment later, but not before George had noted a strange look on his face. On anyone else, he would have called it fear. Dark circles hung under Alex's eyes, as though he hadn't been sleeping.

"Hello, father," his son replied stiffly, turning back to his food and picking at it absently.

"Long day at school?" George asked as he stepped through the kitchen. It was late, but their cook had left a meal for him in the refrigerator. He retrieved it and placed it in the oven, the device having automatically heated up when the house registered that he had returned home. The AI had apparently learned his routine.

"Something like that," Alex murmured. He seemed to hesitate for a second, his mouth opening and closing slightly as though he was considering his words carefully. "It's been a while since we visited mother's grave," he finally said.

George's eyes snapped to his son's face. This was the first time Alex had mentioned his mother in recent memory. "It has been at least a few years," George replied cautiously. In fact, he visited his wife's grave every year on the anniversary of her death, but he had long ago stopped pressuring his son to come with him. "Would you like to go this weekend?" he asked tentatively.

A conflicted expression flitted across Alex's face. "Maybe," he said, eyes dropping back down to his plate.

"Well, just let me know. I can move a few things around if need be," George said, taking a seat opposite Alex at the kitchen counter.

George couldn't help but inspect his son discretely as he waited for his meal. He had almost given up hope on Alfred managing to help him. However, this terse, tense conversation was the most the two of them had spoken in weeks – and about Alex's mother no less.

Despite this possible evidence of Alex's improvement, doubts still clouded George's mind as he considered Ryan's recent report. Could Alex have been complicit in the breakin at Jason's house? His head of security certainly seemed to think so. However, he would need to be careful about probing his son.

"My accountant was reconciling our personal expenses for this last month and noticed a large cash withdrawal a few days ago," George began, breaking the heavy silence. "Do you remember what that was for?"

Alex accidentally dropped his fork, the metal utensil rattling sharply against the counter. He quickly grabbed at the offending instrument before it could tumble to the floor. "I… I'm not sure," his son stuttered in reply, refusing to make eye contact with George. "I probably made a withdrawal to go out with some friends. There are a few places downtown that still accept cash – believe it or not."

George nodded slightly, squinting as he inspected his son. "That makes sense. I'll let the accountant know it was legitimate. He was a bit worried about possible fraud." Despite his reassuring explanation, George was anything but calm. He couldn't decide whether he was more concerned about the implications of Alex's reaction or how his normally emotionless son had responded so violently.

"I… I have a question," Alex said, still staring at his plate. "But it may sound a bit strange."

"I'm all ears," George replied, glancing up at his son.

"Do you ever…" he began before stopping and sighing in frustration. "Do you ever question your actions? Like, look back on what you've done and wonder whether you should have handled things differently."

George cocked his head slightly as he considered Alex's question. "Honestly, no. I learned years ago that hesitation prevents progress – I just need to keep charging forward. You can't change the past, only learn from

it and move on." He chuckled softly. "I've managed large companies for most of my life. I firmly strangled that niggling, doubting voice in the back of my mind long ago."

Alex finally looked up at him, meeting his gaze. His son's eyes looked… haunted. George didn't have a better word to describe it. A moment later, Alex glanced away again. "So, it's a weakness," his son muttered.

"Well, I don't know if I would…" George began but was interrupted as a chime resounded through the house.

"Sir, a call is coming in for you," the house's AI reported.

George frowned in irritation. "I thought I told you to hold my calls in the evening."

"This call is coming in from an exempt number and is marked as confidential," the robotic voice replied calmly.

He glanced at Alex, noting the way his shoulders had slumped forward in resignation. George was about to tell the AI to hold the call – that this conversation seemed more important, but Alex chose that moment to stand abruptly. The legs of his stool scraped against the tiled floor as he backed away from the counter. "It's fine. Take the call. I have some homework to do anyway."

Alex immediately stepped out of the room, leaving his unfinished meal on the counter. George's eyes followed his form as he disappeared into the hallway, his thoughts troubled. What was going on with Alex?

"Sir, would you like me to connect the call in your office?" the AI asked.

George ignored the AI. Something felt off with Alex, but perhaps this was a sign that Alfred's influence was finally helping his son. He certainly seemed more "normal" – despite the depressing tenor of their conversation and the fact that something was clearly troubling him. Of course, that was putting aside the mounting circumstantial evidence that his son might have been involved in the death of two teenagers.

"Sir?" the AI nudged him when he didn't respond.

"Yes… yes," George replied in a distracted voice, before pushing himself away from the counter and grabbing his plate from the oven. That same doubting voice in the back of his mind urged him to walk after his son – to speak with him. Yet George firmly suppressed that worrying, nagging part of his mind. There were still things to do, and there was nowhere to go but forward.

* * *

When Jason first looked into the pool, he only saw his own

reflection. His hood was pushed back, revealing his face. Dark circles hung under his eyes, and his mouth was pinched into a determined line, evidence of the long, grueling days he had spent searching for the Dark One's grimoire with his teammates.

As he continued to stare into the water, an image slowly began to materialize. He saw the faint outline of what appeared to be a small statue, its surface reflecting a dull bronze glow. Jason's brow wrinkled in confusion, and he tried to look away, only to find himself suddenly unable to move. A moment later, the world around him began to stutter and jerk, the moonlit cave slowly disappearing.

In the next instant, Jason was standing in what appeared to be the hallway of an upscale townhome. Dark mahogany boards ran the length of the floor, and the walls around him were riddled with picture frames – many housing medals and trophies. He could hear voices coming from down the hall, and he inched forward slowly, wincing as his footsteps caused the floorboards to creak.

As Jason rounded the corner of the hallway, he found himself standing in the entryway to a modern kitchen. Three people stood around an island in the center of the room. His eyes widened in shock as he immediately recognized the middle-aged man and woman standing in front of him. They looked younger than he remembered, but there was simply no mistaking them.

These are Franks parents! Jason thought in astonishment.

The couple was fawning over a young man who couldn't have been more than fourteen years old. He seemed to take his parents' congratulations in stride, glancing anywhere but at the trophy resting on the marble countertop of the kitchen island. Jason had only met the young man once before, but he could still easily recognize Frank's older brother, Chris.

"This is amazing," Frank's father exclaimed. "Your mother and I are so proud of you!"

"It was nothing, really," Chris mumbled.

Jason stepped gingerly into the room, realizing that the people around the island didn't seem to be able to see him. This was similar to the scene he had witnessed with Rex, but eerily and unmistakably more *real*. This most definitely was not set inside Awaken Online. How did the game know what Frank's parents or his brother looked like? With a growing sense of dread, Jason began to suspect that Alfred's influence was at play here.

"Nothing?" Frank's mother said with an arched eyebrow. "Your research was fascinating. It's just a baby step, and a lot more work needs to be done, but there were still recruiters from major universities and tech companies asking us for meetings with you!"

"Frank! Rebecca! Get in here and congratulate your brother,"

Frank's father called, his voice echoing down the hallway. Jason jumped involuntarily as the man's eyes seemed to lock on him in the doorway, only to turn away a moment later.

They can't see me, Jason realized.

He heard footsteps thumping down the hallway, and he quickly moved into the kitchen. Frank's younger sister soon came into view. She must have only been six or seven and was a full head shorter than Jason remembered. His mind wheeled in confusion as he tried to process what he was seeing. What was this?

Then his mind went blank a moment later as Frank shuffled into the kitchen behind his sister. He was just as Jason remembered him, the pair having known each other since middle school. Frank's pre-pubescent body still hadn't given up its baby fat, and Jason knew it wouldn't. His friend's belly bulged slightly below his t-shirt, and the icon for a first-person shooter was emblazoned across the front. Jason recognized the logo, but the game was at least six years old by now.

How long ago is this? Hell, what am I even seeing right now? Some sort of simulation?

"Your brother made first place in the science fair," Frank's father declared. "I guess he's following in my footsteps," he added draping his arm around Chris' shoulders.

"What? Did he invent some sort of weight loss pill? Frank could sure use it," Rebecca said, glancing at her overweight brother where he slunk near the back of the kitchen. "Maybe then he could make the football team."

Jason's gaze shifted to his burly friend, noticing how his face fell at this comment and he kept quiet, his jaw clenching and his eyes fixed firmly on the ground. As a silent observer, Jason also noticed the faint flash of anger that had flitted across Chris' face and the way he glanced at his brother with a compassionate expression. Yet the older teenager kept his silence as well, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

These nuances were apparently lost on Frank's parents, as they were caught up in their son's success. They chuckled good-naturedly at Rebecca's barbed comment, and Frank's mother replied, "Not quite, although I'm sure Chris could branch off into pharmaceuticals if he chose. His project was centered around applied materials. Chris proposed something rather revolutionary involving solar cells. He actually managed to create a crude material that is semi-transparent, but contains photo-voltaic cells and micro-circuitry," she continued with a proud smile at Chris.

"This might be the first step to installing glass paneling along the city's skyways that also acts as a source of solar energy," Frank's father added in excitement. "But that's just the first of many possible applications. This could potentially apply to any window or glass-like

surface."

"Dad really did a lot of the work," Chris replied, trying to downplay his achievement as he glanced awkwardly at his siblings. His sister crossed her arms and glared daggers at him while Frank stood awkwardly in the back, trying to avoid drawing attention.

"Always humble, huh? I may have given you access to some of my lab's equipment and played an advisory role," Frank's father said, thumping Chris on the back. "But the idea and execution were entirely your own."

"Your father and I never had any doubts that you would win," Frank's mother added. "Speaking of which, we prepared something for the occasion." With this last statement, Frank's mother gestured at her husband, and, with a grin, he ducked into a side room.

"Fifty bucks says it's another chemistry kit," Rebecca muttered, her eyes darting to the trophy on the countertop and a frown creasing her lips.

A moment later, Frank's father stepped back into the kitchen with a black Labrador puppy in his arms. The animal looked at the group with sleepy, bleary eyes, his tiny mouth opening in a yawn as Frank's father set him on the floor.

"Ahh, that's no fair!" Rebecca said, rushing forward to pet the puppy. "I've been asking for a dog for years!" Meanwhile, Frank still hovered near the back of the kitchen, watching the dog with a longing expression on his face.

"What do you think?" Frank's father asked with a grin, draping his arm back across Chris' shoulders.

"It's great. *He's* great." Chris amended, yet Jason wasn't sure he quite believed him. For some reason, the teenager looked uncomfortable with all of the praise that was being heaped on his shoulders. "He's super cute."

"We also made reservations at your favorite restaurant for tonight," Frank's mother added. Then she glanced down at the Core on her wrist, the device at least a few generations behind the model Jason owned. "Oh, I didn't realize how late it had gotten. We need to go get ready. Let's plan to leave in the next few minutes."

"Minutes? I'm not even dressed!" Rebecca squeaked, immediately forgetting the puppy and racing to her room to get ready.

"Congratulations again, Chris," Frank's father added, slapping Chris on the back once more before exiting the kitchen with his wife.

Jason stood in the kitchen with Frank and his brother. Chris' face looked downcast as he glared at the trophy on the counter. Meanwhile, the puppy had ambled across the room to Frank, the middle-school version of his friend dropping to his knees to pet the small animal as it licked his fingers.

“Aren’t you a cute little guy,” Frank murmured. “What’s your name?”

“I suspect that they never named him,” Chris commented, stepping around the island toward his brother. “That’s pretty typical of them. Drop a living animal in my lap and then just bolt,” he added. Despite his morose tone, Chris smiled slightly as he watched the puppy snuggle up against Frank before bouncing around him animatedly.

“He seems to like you,” Chris commented, his eyes on Frank’s face. “Tell you what. Why don’t we have this be our dog? You can even name him.”

“Really?” Frank asked, his eyes widening in surprise. “I thought this was supposed to be your present for winning the science fair.”

Chris snorted slightly. “You mean a competition that our parents forced me to enter and dad pressured me to prepare for? I swear, he spent hours making me read college-level chemistry textbooks. Like I have a lot of interest in creating transparent solar panels,” he replied in a bitter voice.

The teenager lapsed into silence, once again glaring at the trophy on the counter. With a shake of his head, he finally turned back to Frank. “No, this is *our* dog,” Chris said firmly. “So, what do you want to call him?”

“I don’t know…” Frank murmured. “He seems friendly. What about Buddy?”

A smile drifted across Chris’ face. “You know what? I love it.” He reached down to pet the puppy. “What do you think, Buddy? Do you like your new name?”

The puppy glanced skeptically at Chris’ hand before licking it furiously. “I guess so,” Chris added with a laugh. “Well, I’m going to go get ready, I guess,” the young man continued. “You should probably get dressed too, Frank. I bet they made reservations at some ungodly expensive place.”

“I will,” Frank said quietly, still staring at the dog as it bounced around him. Chris exited the kitchen, and it was only when his brother left that Frank leaned down toward the puppy. “I think you’re going to be happy here, Buddy. We’re going to be best friends.”

The world around Jason began to stutter and jerk erratically as the scene faded from view. He was still trying to come to terms with what he had just witnessed. Was that one of Frank’s memories? Alfred might have made up the scene, but the details were spot on. The appearance of Frank’s family. Their home. The way his sister treated him. It had just felt so *real*.

Before Jason had a chance to really consider these questions, the world began to materialize around him once again. He was

suddenly standing outside of Frank's townhouse, trees dotting the sidewalk outside and rustling gently in the faint breeze. Bright sunlight shone down on the street, revealing a driverless car on the curb, the trunk open and luggage spilling out.

"Did you remember your toothbrush?" Frank's mother's voice said from behind Jason. He whirled and found himself looking at Frank's family as they stood near the stairs leading up to the front door to their home.

"Yes, of course," Chris replied calmly, but Jason detected a note of irritation – as though this wasn't the first inane question his mother had asked. He also had to do a double take as he saw Chris' appearance. He looked much older, stubble dotting his chin.

"And you'll call us when you get to the campus?" Frank's father asked. Jason noted a few strands of gray hair that he hadn't noticed before. He almost looked how Jason remembered him now.

Maybe a few years have passed? Jason wondered.

"For the fifth time, yes," Chris replied with a small smile. "The university is only a couple of hours away. You guys act like I'm traveling halfway around the world or something."

"We're allowed to be nervous about our first child going off to college," his mother replied, tears hovering in her eyes. "We thought we would have another year at least."

Frank's father shook his head, placing a comforting arm around his wife's waist. "The early admission and scholarship were just too good to pass up. You know that honey," he said.

"It'll be okay," Chris said. "I'll come to visit often, I promise."

The teenager turned to Rebecca, noticing her pinched expression. "What is it? Don't tell me you're sad to see me leave. I know you've been eyeing my room for ages."

"You mean my new studio?" Rebecca replied with a sly grin. She was much taller now, and her long hair was braided in an intricate pattern that ran almost to her waist. Small smudges and paint stains marred her otherwise immaculate appearance. "I started moving in my art supplies about an hour ago."

"That's not terribly surprising from our young Michelangelo" Chris replied with a smile. He ruffled Rebecca's hair, earning him a glare from the young girl. "Try to behave while I'm gone." Rebecca just snorted softly and stepped back into the house – likely to finish claiming her brother's room.

"Well, let's get the rest of this luggage packed up," Frank's father said, lifting a few more bags and gesturing for his wife to help.

Jason noticed Frank sitting on the steps leading up to the house, Buddy sitting quietly at his feet. The puppy had grown up already. Actually, calling him a *puppy* was misleading. There were at

least seventy pounds of fully adult dog panting beside Frank. His friend had aged as well. By Jason's guess, he was probably in early high school at this point.

Yet it still seemed like his parents treated him like a second-class child. They had largely ignored him during the exchange. Jason wasn't certain he had ever noticed that before. Although looking back on it, he really hadn't gone over to Frank's house very often. Maybe once or twice over the course of several years. He was now beginning to understand why.

Could this be what Frank lives with every day? Jason wondered.

Chris seemed to share his thought, looking at his younger brother with troubled eyes. He walked up and sat down beside Frank, idly scratching Buddy behind the ears. They sat quietly for a few long seconds, watching their parents bicker as they crammed yet another bag into the already overstuffed car.

"Do they know that you're planning to change your major?" Frank asked quietly.

Chris just shook his head. "They don't have a clue. They think I'm going into chemical engineering. Could you imagine their reaction if I told them I wanted to act for a living? They call them starving artists for a reason," he said in imitation of his mother's voice.

"Knowing you, they'd probably pitch in money for your first movie," Frank said bitterly.

His brother couldn't help but grin. "You know what? You're probably right – at least after dad got finished screaming."

Even Frank smiled at that, but his expression sobered a few seconds later. "I'm going to miss you," he murmured.

"I know. I'm going to miss you too," Chris replied, resting a hand on his brother's shoulder. "It'll be okay, Frank. You just need to hang in there and not let Rebecca or our parents get to you." He glanced down at the black lab. "Besides, you have Buddy, right?"

"You mean *your* dog?" Frank turned away from his brother as he spoke so that he couldn't see the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Yet that didn't hide them from Jason where he stood unnoticed beside the pair.

"I mean *our* dog. And now *your* dog," Chris replied. "I'm sure you'll take good care of him."

"Hey," Chris said, placing a hand on Frank's shoulder and forcing his younger brother to look at him with his red-rimmed eyes. "I know you hate it here and you feel like Rebecca and I outshine you at every turn, but that won't always be the case. Someday you are going to find your thing." His brother looked back at the car and their parents. "When you do, don't hesitate and don't let it go – no matter what. You're capable of a lot more than you realize."

Frank's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to reply, but his mother interrupted. "I think we have you settled, Chris! You need to go, or you'll be late for orientation. Come give me one last hug before you leave."

Chris stood, glancing back at Frank one last time. "I'm sorry," he mouthed before hurrying off to hug his parents and then stepping into the car.

Jason's eyes were focused on Frank as the vehicle began to pull away from the curb and drift into traffic. It was the way his friend's shoulders slumped forward and the way his hand numbly petted Buddy that made Jason's heart lurch. He had never known what Frank's home life was like or how much his brother had meant to him. His friend had certainly never talked about it before. Even Buddy seemed to pick up on his master's mood, resting his head in Frank's lap and whining softly.

Through it all, Frank's parents were oblivious. They stepped up toward the door, his mother sparing a glance at her younger son as she walked past. "Come on, Frank. I'm sure there is some homework you should be doing – your grades could certainly use it."

Frank just sat there numbly, unmoving as he gazed at the car until it disappeared around a bend in the road, unshed tears glistening in his eyes. Then he took a deep breath and slowly pulled himself to his feet, turning to enter the house.

The world around Jason suddenly lurched again, twisting and swirling around him even as he tried to grapple with what he had just witnessed. This couldn't be fake. Too many of the facts lined up with what he knew. He knew Frank's brother had left for college during high school and he rarely visited. Which only left one conclusion. He had just witnessed Frank's memories – however impossible that seemed.

Jason felt guilty, like he was spying on his friend. These were important events in Frank's life, and they put his unhappiness on full display. He had lost one of the only people in his life that treated him like a real person and not just a disappointment – the son who could never measure up to his brother's or sister's greatness.

Jason wanted to squeeze his eyes shut to block out the images he knew would come next. If he was viewing Frank's memories, then he expected Riley was next. The look on Frank's face was still burned into his mind. When his friend thought no one was looking, he let his mask slip. What Jason had seen underneath was pain – raw and unfiltered. In some ways, it felt selfish, but he didn't want to know these things about his friends.

Yet he had no choice but to keep going. The world soon resolved itself around Jason, but this time he was somewhere

unfamiliar. He stood in the center of what appeared to be a living room, and he whirled in a circle, confused and disoriented.

People filled the room, sitting on couches and chairs that lined the walls. Their faces were all cast in the same stoic expression, and they were all dressed in varying shades of gray and black. Despite the number of people filling the room, the house was quiet, everyone speaking in hushed whispers. An almost palpable air of sadness hung over the room which even seemed to make the colors of the furniture and paintings on the walls feel washed out and dull.

And through this gloomy scene raced a young girl. She came bolting into the room, slightly out of breath and mud was smeared on the hem of her dress. “Riley Marie Jones!” a voice snapped, and Jason watched as the girl visibly flinched.

Riley’s mother stepped into the room a moment later, grabbing the girl’s shoulder. “Do not run in the house. Your grandfather is upstairs…” her mother hesitated, glancing at the other people filling the living room. “Your grandpa is resting,” she amended quickly. “You need to be quiet.”

Jason’s eyes widened in shock as he watched the little girl look up at her mom, a mixture of guilt and fear flitting across her young face. *She’s maybe four or five*, Jason thought. *But what’s going on here? It looks like they’re having a funeral.*

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Riley said. “I didn’t mean to wake up grandpa.”

Her mother’s expression softened as she looked at the young girl. “It’s okay. Just try to not to run around the house. If you need to, you can go outside and play.”

“Okay, mama,” Riley said, nodding quickly.

“Sarah,” someone called from another room. “Could you help me in the kitchen?”

Riley’s mom glanced over her shoulder. “Sure, I’ll be right there.” Then she turned back to Riley. “Remember, behave and be *quiet*.”

The little girl nodded again, her eyes wide as her mother disappeared into the other room. Then she looked around her at the other people sitting around the room, whispering in quiet voices. Jason could almost see the thoughts flit through Riley’s mind, confusion and uncertainty warring across her face as she tried to decide what to do.

Coming to some sort of decision, Riley began wandering through the rooms. Jason kept pace with her, noticing that the other rooms were filled with more unfamiliar individuals attired in similarly drab clothing. He could only catch furtive snippets of conversation.

“It’s so unfortunate about uncle…” one young woman

whispered.

"…is he in much pain?" another older gentleman murmured.

Are they family members? Jason wondered. Clearly someone was sick or had passed away.

Finding nothing to occupy her attention on the ground floor, Riley eyed the staircase leading upstairs. After the encounter with her mother, she glanced surreptitiously at the other adults in the room and tried her best not to draw any attention as she inched toward the stairs and made her way up the steps.

Where is she going? Jason could only follow the young girl, curious where this was heading despite his earlier reservations. After witnessing Frank's memories, he couldn't help but suspect that this would end badly.

As the girl reached the top of the stairs, she paused. A long dark hallway stretched across the house's second floor, the hall cast in shadowy darkness. It seemed no one had bothered to turn on the lights up here. A rhythmic thumping could be heard from one of the rooms at the far end of the hallway, followed by a faint wheezing sound that seemed to rattle through the air.

Riley made her way down the hallway cautiously, her small feet feeling out the floorboards to avoid disturbing the ancient wood. As she neared a door on the other end of the hall, her small hand reached up and hesitantly tugged at the handle. She slipped inside, Jason following closely behind her.

He immediately froze as he stepped into the room. An old man lay on the bed, his skin wrinkled and pockmarked with age. Yet what drew Jason's attention was the ventilator tube strapped over his mouth, and the array of electronics lined up next to the bed. He could now understand the wheezing thump he had heard from the hallway. The machinery was breathing for the old man, his chest rising and falling in sync with the mechanical rhythm of the nearby equipment.

Riley stepped up beside what Jason could only assume was her grandpa, taking his wrinkled hand. "Hey there, girl," he croaked suddenly, causing Riley to jump. He chuckled softly at her reaction, the movement causing a short coughing fit.

"You scared me, grandpa!" Riley said, before doing a double take and lowering her voice. "That was mean," she whispered.

"And you snuck into my bedroom," he wheezed softly as he regained his breath, a smile curling his wrinkled lips. "How is your mother doing?"

"She is worried about you and told me to stop running around the house," Riley murmured, looking off to the side and scuffing her shoe on the floor.

"And why were you running?" her grandpa asked with a kindly

expression.

"I… I was bored," Riley said. "I know I shouldn't have. It's just that everyone is being so quiet, and no one will play with me."

"Nonsense. I'll tell you what, do you want to hear a secret?" he asked, motioning for her to come closer. As Riley leaned forward, he whispered, "I'm bored too. I've been lying in this bed for ages."

Riley's eyes lit up. "I found a little creek behind the house! I could show you."

The older man smiled. "I know the creek you're talking about, but that might be a bit too far for me to walk." He glanced at the machinery beside him, turning his head so the younger girl couldn't see his expression – but his face still visible from where Jason stood nearby. His expression looked pained as his eyes skimmed the rows of data on a nearby screen and he saw the older man heave a soft, frustrated sigh.

The old man turned back to Riley, a thoughtful look painted across his face. "I might have another idea, though. Do you think you could help me outside?"

Riley hesitated, her eyes going wide. "I don't think I should. Mama told me that you were sick."

A sly look crossed the old man's face. "Really? Well, did she tell you that you could go play outside?"

"Well… I guess she did," Riley said slowly.

"Then, I'm sure it will be fine with her then," her grandpa continued. "Besides, we don't need to go far, and it's a beautiful day outside." He gestured at the door along the side of the bedroom, a few weak rays of sunlight managing to make it past the thick curtain that hung in front of the door. "The house is built against a hill, and that door leads directly outside. I may just need a little help."

"Okay…" Riley replied, still biting her lip uncertainly.

Her grandfather shifted in the bed, straining to push himself to a sitting position. He then peeled back the thin sheet covering his lower body, revealing that he was wearing a hospital gown. Hesitating for a moment, he coughed into the mouthpiece of the ventilator. Reaching beside the bed, he tugged at a small cylinder.

"Can you help me?" he asked Riley, her small head nodding enthusiastically in response. She pulled out the cylinder and handed it to her grandfather. He promptly pulled off his mask and placed a thin plastic band over his head and under his nose before attaching the hose to the small cylinder. Jason could only assume that he was holding a small oxygen tank.

"Okay, now you'll need to grab grandpa's cane," he explained, pointing at a wooden cane on the other side of the room.

The girl quickly grabbed the cane and handed it to her

grandfather. The older man groaned softly as he managed to pull himself to his feet, leaning heavily on the cane. Once he was standing, Riley's grandfather handed Riley the oxygen tank and the pair made their way painfully to the door as Jason watched, unable to help them. He wished he could enter the scene and offer Riley's grandfather a hand.

Luckily, they made it to the door without incident, and a moment later they were outside. As Riley's grandfather had explained, the house abutted a hill and the door exited onto level ground. A forest ringed the house, the branches of tall oaks stretching into the sky.

The older man gestured at a nearby stump. "Let's go right there," he suggested, wheezing slightly despite the oxygen being fed through the tube wrapped around his face.

A few seconds later, he slumped down onto the stump – clearly exhausted by even the short trip from his bedroom to his new, makeshift seat. He sat for a long moment with his eyes closed, his aged skin absorbing the warmth of the sunlight. Meanwhile, his heavy breathing slowed.

"What now, grandpa?" Riley asked.

He opened his eyes and glanced at the young girl with a smile. "Here is the fun part. You see that little shed," he said, gesturing at a small shack near the house. "Inside is a bow and a quiver of arrows. I'm going to show you how to shoot."

Riley's eyes lit up with excitement, and a moment later she was already racing over to the shed. She returned a minute later with a wooden recurve gripped in one hand and dragging a quiver along the ground behind her, filled with dull, plastic arrows.

"Is this it?" she asked, presenting her newfound loot.

"It is indeed," her grandpa wheezed. "Now, that bow is pretty weak. It's only a ten or fifteen-pound training bow, so you should be able to draw it even at your age."

When he saw the blank look on the young girl's face, he smiled. "Okay, just take out an arrow and place the little notched part against the string next to that little round piece. Yeah, right there," he added as the girl followed his instructions.

"Place your left hand here," he instructed, shifting her hand to the bow's grip with gentle fingers. "Then use your right hand to pull back on the string. Gently."

Riley's right arm trembled as she pulled back on the string. "Now what?" she gasped, when she had finally managed to pull the string as far as it would go.

"Now you point it away from the house and let go," her grandpa said, wheezing softly.

Riley turned and pointed the dull plastic arrow at the woods encircling the house. She took a breath and released. The arrow launched from the string, sailing through the air and thudding against a tree trunk. Unfortunately, the arrow's tip was blunt, and it didn't manage to sink into the wood. Instead, it tumbled to the ground.

"Did I do good?" Riley asked, whirling back to look at her grandpa, a broad excited smile painted her face.

"Very good," her grandpa said, placing a hand on her shoulder. His breath was coming in ragged gasps now, and he wasn't looking well. Without thinking, Jason stepped forward and almost touched his shoulder. He hesitated at the last moment, suddenly uncertain what would happen if he tried to touch someone during this… well, whatever this was.

Despite her age, Riley wasn't oblivious to her grandfather's labored breathing. "Are you okay?" she asked, concern written across her face.

"I… I'm fine," her grandfather replied between gasps. "It feels so good to be outside again, and that was an amazing shot. I may have gotten a little too… excited"

He leaned forward, and his eyes closed slightly. "You don't look okay," Riley said, her expression growing scared and uncertain. "Should I get Mama?"

"No… no," her grandfather replied. "I… want to watch you shoot again. Can you show… Grandpa one last time?"

Riley nodded, her eyes still uncertain. Then she turned back to the quiver that rested against the stump, pulling another arrow and taking aim again. Her arm struggled to pull back the string, and, a few seconds later, another arrow raced through the air toward the woods. This arrow landed with more force, managing to penetrate the thick bark and hang from the trunk.

"Grandpa, look!" Riley shouted, turning back to the older man.

She froze as she saw him lying across the ground, his chest not moving. Riley's eyes went wide, and she rushed over, pressing her hands to the old man's arm and shaking him gently. "Grandpa! Are you okay? Wake up!" Her cries rang out loudly, and Jason could already see several family members emerging from the house and glancing at the young girl in confusion.

Jason reached a hand out to comfort the girl. To help her. To do something – anything, but he could already see the world beginning to shimmer and shift around him, signaling another transition. He could see the tears streaming down Riley's face, her hands clutching at her grandfather's unmoving body as she shouted at him.

"No! Please let me stay," Jason yelled. But, just like Riley, his

cries landed on deaf ears, sounding muted and surreal as the scene of Riley crouching above her grandfather faded from view and was replaced by an endless black void.

Chapter 38 - Evolved

Alexion stood on the keep's balcony, watching the rays of sunlight refracting off the crystalline walls surrounding the city. He could make out tendrils of smoke curling from the chimneys of the city's many homes. The townspeople and players were winding through its streets and thronging its market. Despite his most recent failure, the Crystal Reach was now thriving – a product of the decisions he had made over the last couple weeks in-game.

Naturally, his eyes eventually returned to the keep's courtyard. The ruined remains of the ballistae were still piled along the walls ringing the enclosure. The fires of the pillars had long since died out, large circular piles of ash the only evidence of the brutal massacre of over a hundred slaves. And in the center of it all lingered the same crimson pentagram.

Alexion shied away from looking at the magic symbol, shuddering slightly as his encounter with the Dark One flashed through his mind once more. The images of his actions – of his victims – were now ever-present, as though the dark god had somehow branded him. He could see the eyes of his classmates as he blackmailed them and his mother's bloodstained hospital sheets. Even in his dreams, the memories refused to relinquish their hold on him.

"Why so dour my dear stupid knight?" the Lady asked suddenly. The light god abruptly materialized beside Alexion, her skin glowing in the soft sunlight.

Before he could stop himself, Alexion snapped, "I'm fucking fine. Especially considering you abandoned me to the Dark One!" He fully rounded on the woman, stabbing a finger at her while his free hand rested on the hilt of the sword at his waist. "You let him torture me for his own sick amusement while you did what? You walked away?"

The Lady raised a single, immaculately groomed eyebrow. She appeared unaffected by his tirade. "Ahh, so you blame me for your hasty defeat. Interesting. And here I was hoping you had learned something from the experience. Perhaps I was overly optimistic."

"Learned something?" Alexion spat. "All I learned was that I cannot rely upon you. If I am to make my way in this world, it will need to be on my own steam from now on. I expect that won't be difficult since you seem to add little value to our relationship."

The woman smiled slightly at this. "Oh, really? Do you think that my actions are without purpose – even after all this time? That encounter was necessary."

Alexion did a double take, staring at the woman as he tried to

process what she was saying. The anger still seethed and frothed in his veins, and the insidious voice in the back of his mind urged him to retaliate for the harm that she had caused. Yet he hesitated.

"Restraint suits you," the Lady commented, a sneer curling her lips as she noted the war of emotions raging across his face. "I suspected you would fail in your encounter with my brother. He is too powerful now that this Jason has continued to feed him. However, it did offer a valuable learning experience.

"I see you don't understand," the Lady continued, observing Alexion's confused reaction. "Let me enlighten you. As you know, my affinity is based around confidence. You certainly aren't short on that particular trait. However, it is easy for confidence to turn into arrogance. You thought to tackle a god with some siege weapons and a few low-leveled soldiers? How pathetic.

"And then, to make matters worse, you walked inside the spell caging that god?" the Lady demanded. "Or did you forget that particularly stupendous act of idiocy? And for what? For the glory of landing the killing blow? So yes, boy. I knew you would fail and set up these events intentionally." The god's eyes met his, flashing with golden light. "I manufactured this situation to teach you the cost of arrogance – and the swift defeat that comes at the hands of hubris."

Alexion's mind went numb as he listened to the Lady, his anger swiftly cooling as he struggled to think of any counter-arguments. Yet the inexorable logic of her comments weighed on him. He had failed. He had strangled that voice of doubt and worry – just as his father had urged, but it had led him down a path of failure and caused him to seriously underestimate his opponent. He couldn't help but draw a comparison with his original attack on the Twilight Throne. Even in that engagement, he had overcommitted his forces and refused to consider that Jason was a savvy tactician.

"You… you are right," Alexion acknowledged, refusing to look at the god who stood beside him. The words pained him to say – in part because he could only imagine the look of unrestrained, condescending glee that was likely painted across her face.

"I'm not certain I heard that," the Lady replied, humor in her voice.

"You were right," Alexion hissed through gritted teeth. "I underestimated the Dark One and let my ego cloud my judgment." His gaze rounded on the irritating woman, his will hardening. "But this will be the last time I make that mistake. I will find a way to repay both the dark god and Jason for their actions. I promise you this – they will suffer."

In contrast to his expectations, a genuine smile graced the Lady's lips. "Perfect. Then you are ready to take the next step along my path."

With a wave of the god's hand, a crystalline panel along the wall slid back, causing the balcony to shudder and tremble. Soon, the mana well

was revealed once more. Alexion stepped cautiously inside. His eyes were fixed on the column comprised entirely of white gold standing in the center of the room. A bowl rested calmly atop the pillar, golden liquid swimming in its depths.

Unlike the last time he had witnessed the well, the mana now seemed to call to him, its draw inexplicable. He couldn't shake the feeling that he would be embraced by its power, and he would never have to feel anything – ever again. That it would make him stronger…

"I think you are finally ready to accept the power of the well," the Lady explained, stepping up beside Alexion and whispering in his ear. "The mana within the bowl represents the fanaticism and devotion that you have engendered among your people – their confidence and their prayers. This is pure power that will let you shape and grow this city to new heights."

"I want it…" Alexion murmured, his hand already reaching for the liquid.

Unlike the last time, the Lady did not move to stop him, and, a moment later, his fingers touched the golden mana. The substance clung to his skin, feeling warm to the touch – almost inviting. Then it began to creep up his arm. Alexion didn't feel afraid or worried as the liquid crept over his body. He felt… nothing. That same hollow void descended upon him once again, the sensation comforting and enveloping after the torrent of memories and emotions he had endured at the hands of the Old Man. He gave himself over to the feeling willingly, letting it wash away the clutter that filled his mind.

The mana curled and coiled up his arm, stretching across his torso and creeping up his neck. As the liquid neared his eyes, he felt a sudden flash of anxiety, but the emotion was quickly burned away by the mana that pulsed through his veins and across his skin. There was no room for doubt here – or for hesitation.

"The light shines brightly," the Lady whispered behind him. "It warms the skin and casts away the darkness that clouds our minds. It burns away those emotions that hold us back – letting us reach our true potential."

The liquid finally covered Alexion's face, and he instinctively closed his eyes. The comforting warmth had turned to a searing heat that felt like it was peeling at his skin. However, he could not muster any concern over this – nothing could hurt him right now. The energy cascaded and spun across his skin until he felt like he would lose himself to this power.

And then, as quickly as the sensation had swept over him, it vanished. The liquid mana abruptly hardened and shattered – casting Alexion out of his trance-like state. He stumbled slightly as he regained control of his faculties once more. He felt suddenly empty, as though he had lost something incredibly important. The sensation was disconcerting and almost painful.

Seeking that feeling again, he instinctively channeled his light mana. The sensation came back once more, but this time more muted and softer. As he regained his composure, Alexion's back straightened, and he shifted slightly to the clink of his platemail. The movement also caused a rustling sound that whispered through the small room.

"Welcome my warrior, my new Seraph," the Lady's voice echoed slightly through the small room. "Embrace your new self and lead our people to greatness!"

Whirling, Alexion peered at a crystalline wall. The surface rippled and contorted before becoming mirror-like. The creature that stared back at him was not the man he once knew. His skin now carried a translucent golden hue, and a crown of light hovered above his brow. The source of the rustling also became apparent. Six wings now stretched from his back, each spindly arm adorned with pristine white feathers.

As he gradually came to terms with the changes, Alexion's gaze shifted back to the Lady. A small, proud smile curled her lips – an expression he was unaccustomed to seeing from the normally condescending woman.

"What do we do now?" Alexion finally asked, his voice sounding richer and deeper to his own ears.

"Now?" the Lady asked, her smile widening and becoming more shark-like. "Now, we finally get to work. We have an empire to build and enemies to crush, after all."

* * *

Jason suddenly found himself back inside the moonlit cavern, droplets of water sprinkling down from the hole in the ceiling of the cave and splashing against the surface of the pool in the center of the room. His thoughts were frantic as he replayed the previous scenes in his mind. He couldn't ignore the truth of what he had seen – his friends' memories. Or at least something so close to their real memories that they were indistinguishable from the actual events.

"I see you have finally witnessed the true power of the pool," the Old Man said, stepping forward calmly and picking up on Jason's surface thoughts.

"Those were Frank and Riley's memories," Jason murmured. "But how… how is that even possible?"

"I told you before, when a person in this world dies, their memories – their soul – returns to this pool," the Old Man explained. "Usually, those memories are fragmented and imprecise. They are little more than a motley assemblage of a person's last moments and

critical events in their life. In your world, I believe the expression is that a person's life 'flashes before their eyes' when they stand at death's door. That is a fitting comparison here.

"However, when a person's remains are interred in the mana well, this provides greater *clarity*," the dark god continued, his voice echoing slightly through the cavern. "This is what you did inadvertently with Rex. You cast his remains into the well and were granted insight into his soul – into that turning point in his life that made him into the man you knew."

Jason was beginning to understand. "So, when my friends sacrificed themselves and their blood entered the well…"

"Their memories were collected and brought here to this place," the Old Man said, waving at the pool as he finished Jason's sentence. "That is the purpose of the sacrifices. They serve to teach a new Keeper the ways of the dark. To let him taste a glimpse of the power I offer and to center and ground him in the lives of his friends and loved ones."

"Then I am to be a Keeper of Souls?" Jason asked, finally piecing together the events he had witnessed over the last few weeks – the fleeting glimpses of the last Keeper's memories. "But what is this place then?" Jason asked, looking around the cavern from a fresh perspective.

The Old Man's lips curled into a smile below his cowl. "I was wondering when you would finally ask that question. This place is a crossroads between life and death. You could consider this my domain, a small metaphysical wrinkle in the world. It was also used extensively by the previous Keepers."

"Used how?" Jason asked.

The Old Man gazed at him for a long moment. "You recall fragments of your encounter with the former Keeper inside the deathscape. However, I suspect most of the events after our conversation are a blank." Jason nodded slowly, trying to recall what had happened after he had witnessed the confrontation between the Old Man and the former Keeper.

"Let me refresh your memory of what happened afterward."

As the dark god finished speaking, he laid a hand on Jason's shoulder. All at once, a burning sensation flooded his limbs, swiftly spreading through his body. At the same time, Jason's memories of his battle inside the deathscape came back in a torrent. He remembered his losing fight against the mad Keeper and the way the ephemeral blue energy jetted from his wounds. In his desperation, he had called upon something outside himself – channeling raw, unfiltered dark mana through the Old Man's scythe.

And the darkness had responded. Tortured, living nightmares

had clawed their way into the world. He remembered their hunger – that endless gnawing craving. That desire for *more*. And his soul had responded, their message resonating with something deep inside himself. He remembered how he had given himself over to that power, going nearly mad in the process. Even now, he could feel that same hunger within himself.

When the Old Man removed his hand, Jason gasped. "You… you suppressed those memories?" he croaked, concern and confusion tinging his voice. While that bottomless hunger was terrifying, it was even more disconcerting to realize the extent of the dark god's and Alfred's influence over his mind.

"They were too much for you to handle at the time, and you had no context for what you had experienced. You were not yet ready to accept the truth. Now, however, you are in a position to better understand the purpose of the mana wells," the Old Man explained calmly.

"The travelers tap into my power, but what they receive is merely a trickle. The prior Keepers were those more closely attuned to their desires, fueling and amplifying what I provide naturally. You tasted a glimpse of the gnawing hunger that is desire and how easy it is to lose oneself to those feelings.

"Yet what is power without the wisdom to use it? I do not wish to reign over a broken, fractured wasteland. My avatars needed something to ground them. Hence, the well. It stores the souls of the Kin, and my Keepers once used those memories to stay grounded in the lives of others – to keep themselves focused on their people.

"You saw this during your encounter with my last avatar," the Old Man continued, glancing away and guilt coloring his voice. "He undertook a forbidden ritual, giving over his mind and body entirely to the dark. I assume he felt this was the only way to protect his people. The grimoire and the wells represented the last remnants of our race, and he felt he had no choice. Anticipating the consequences of his actions, he sought to stay sane by plunging his hand into the mana well and immersing himself in the memories of the Kin."

"Which made him go mad," Jason murmured, recalling the way the Keeper had seemed to speak in strange voices and his erratic behavior, as though many different people were trying to communicate through the same body.

After experiencing his friends' memories, he could only imagine what it would be like to experience the lives of thousands of other people – witnessing their victories and their defeats – their moments of sorrow and heartbreak. All the while being able to do nothing. He remembered how powerless he had felt watching Riley's grandfather pass, tears streaking down her young face. It was more than enough to

make a person go mad.

"The previous Keeper went too far for even the well to counterbalance the dark mana being channeled through his body," the Old Man continued. "That is why that particular ritual is forbidden. It actually corrupts a user's soul, and they lose themselves entirely to the dark and to their desires."

"I think I understand," Jason said slowly, raising his head to meet the dark god's gaze. "So what happens now?"

"Now you make a choice," the dark god replied simply. "This is a decision you must make freely. You have witnessed both the power I offer and the risk that it entails. You now must decide whether or not you wish to take the next step along my path."

Jason hesitated, despite how far he had come to get here. Did he really want this? The memory of how close he had come to losing himself during the battle with the Keeper was still fresh in his mind. The solution that the Old Man was offering was to see into the souls of those that followed him – witnessing their pain and their sorrow. He wasn't sure if he could endure it. His friends' memories had been haunting, as though he was really catching glimpses of their souls.

And they were only two people among thousands. Others relied on him – even if he kept telling himself that they weren't real. Was Rex's sacrifice any less meaningful because he didn't have a flesh and blood body? Was Alfred less real simply because he existed as bits of digital code on a server? The line between Jason's world and this one felt like it kept growing thinner and thinner. He wondered what would happen when that line broke down completely.

Yet these *people* relied upon on him. Would he give up on that trust by backing down now? Simply because it was difficult or painful? What kind of person would that make him? Even as he posed these questions to himself, he knew the answer. It would make him weak. He had entered this game looking for power and a sense of control over his own life. That was exactly what the Old Man was offering him.

Would he back down now, just because that power came with a price?

Jason raised his head, his determination solidifying. He knew what he wanted, deep down in the very core of his being. He wanted to help his friends. He wanted to help Angie. He wanted to claim his place in the world and defend it – whether it was in this digital world or in the real one. And he wouldn't shy away from taking what he wanted. Not anymore. That was something the old Jason would have done. He would have backed down and hung his head while Alex tormented him and others took advantage of him. It was time for him to fully and finally lay his former self to rest.

“I accept,” Jason said firmly. “I accept your path – with both the power and the pain that it entails.”

The Old Man shook his head, chuckling softly. “The resiliency of the human soul is a marvel. If you would accept my path, you need only step into the waters of the pond to complete the ritual.”

Jason turned, glancing at the pool, ripples cascading across its surface as another droplet struck the water. He tamped down on the voice in the back of his mind that warned of the dangers of what he was about to do. This was not the time to back down.

He walked forward with confident steps. As he neared the edge of the pond, he hesitated for only a brief moment before placing a tentative foot into the water. The rocks beneath the surface formed a natural staircase, allowing him to step down into the pond. The water soon ran across his feet and between his legs, but it didn’t seem to soak through his clothing. Instead, the liquid simply felt cool on his skin. Almost… welcoming.

Jason kept moving forward, each step becoming more difficult as he moved deeper into the pond and the waters grew to his thighs and then to his chest. As he finally neared the center of the pool and the water ringed his neck, the Old Man’s voice sounded from behind him. “I expect great things of you, boy. Even from the beginning, I knew there was something special about you. Something in your soul that strikes a balance between the desires that control men’s minds and compassion for your friends and your people. I look forward to seeing where this takes us.”

Jason didn’t bother to turn. Taking a deep breath, he took a final step forward.

His foot didn’t land on the next step, and his head plunged under the water, the world swirling and twisting around him as he sunk below the surface. He reflexively held his breath, and he tried vainly to swim back to the surface, only to find his movements sluggish and uncoordinated – as though he was weighed down by an invisible force. Panic soon swept over him, and his movements became more desperate as he struggled to get back to the surface.

Long, painful moments passed, and the fire in his chest grew – his body demanding oxygen. As the last of his air ran out, and the burning his lungs became unbearable, he opened his mouth with a gasp. Water immediately flooded his mouth and nose, filling his lungs. Jason fully expected to drown.

Yet a moment later he realized he could breathe normally despite the fluid that filled his lungs and he began to relax. As the adrenaline filtered through his blood and his breathing evened out, he inspected his surroundings. Darkness hung around him, impenetrable and immutable. He couldn’t help but draw a comparison with the

void-like darkness he had experienced several times when transitioning to the cavern. However, this place didn't feel *empty*. He sensed that there was something lingering nearby – something besides himself.

After a long moment, indistinct figures began to take shape in the water around him, rapidly growing more solid and real. Dozens of people appeared, their bodies an ephemeral, ghostly blue. Dozens became hundreds. Then thousands. The apparitions of hundreds of years of the Kin stared at him, floating around him in the endless waters of the pond.

He saw men and women. The young and the old. Their expressions warred between pain and rage – sorrow and desperation. Yet he also saw happiness in many of them. Even as he focused on a single soul, images flashed through his mind. He saw their birth, their life, and their death in an instant. Yet that was only a single soul. Thousands upon thousands remained. They hovered around him, sharing their stories with him. Their victories and their defeats.

The images kept going in a frantic rush and Jason lost track of time, losing himself in the whirlwind of memories that flooded through his mind. And as the process continued, he could feel power raging through his body. It started as just a small icy tendril in the center of his chest but grew swiftly. Over time, the dark energy flooded through his veins in a tidal wave, raw and uncontrolled. He could feel the same gnawing, bottomless hunger he had experienced in the deathscape, and his very soul yearned for that power.

Even though pain radiated through his body, he wanted *more*!

He quickly began to lose control, his mind floundering as he struggled to stay focused on the memories.

Then a ghostly hand reached out, touching his arm. He turned to find a young girl staring at him with Riley's eyes. Where her hand rested on his arm, his skin suddenly felt numb, the raging icy torrent abating. Then another hand rested on his shoulder. Turning, he found Frank watching him, a smile on his face. Then others joined them, hands pressing toward him from every direction. Where they touched him, the pain eased – and the desperate hunger subsided. It was still there, but it was manageable.

As the chill sensation finally faded, the ghostly apparitions backed away, watching him silently. A single figure drifted through the crowd, the other men and women parting to let him pass. As he neared, Jason's eyes widened in shock.

"Hey there, boy," Rex said, a lopsided grin on his ghostly face. "I knew we would meet again, but, I'll admit, I didn't expect it to be under such circumstances."

Jason struggled to respond – to say something. Yet he found he

couldn't.

"Don't worry, you still have much to learn," Rex said when he saw Jason straining to speak, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You aren't ready to communicate with us yet. What's important is that you know we are here. We will always be here. In those moments where you feel helpless and overwhelmed, we will be with you."

"All of us," he continued, gesturing at the legions of translucent blue figures around them. "We are Kin, and we do not forget our own."

A sad expression warped Rex's features. "But you cannot stay here. You have others to serve and to protect. I know that you will make us proud."

With these final words, the world began to drift and swirl around Jason, stuttering and jerking erratically. He knew that he was being forced from this place and every fiber of his being strained to stay. He had so much he wanted to say to Rex – so many questions he wanted to ask. Had he been part of the Death Lord? Did Jason owe him one more time for saving his life?

Rex seemed to sense his struggle. "Do not worry, boy. Death isn't the end. It is only a single step among many, a brief respite along the path we each follow. You will come back to us, and we will be here waiting."

Then the apparitions finally faded from view, their bodies breaking apart in a swirling vortex of sapphire light. The energy danced and spun around Jason, swiftly fading away and leaving only darkness in its wake.

A moment later, Jason was standing once more in the room below the Keep. He staggered slightly at the sudden transition, dropping to his knees and his breath coming in heavy, ragged gasps. He struggled to process everything he had just witnessed – his friends' memories, the Kin, Rex… The meeting with his former general had been the most painful in many ways. Their parting and his final words left a bittersweet taste in his mouth, filling him with a mixture of sadness and longing.

As Jason finally managed to get control of himself once again, he looked at his hands where they rested on the floor. He was forced to do a doubletake, noticing that his skin was now a stark white riddled with lines of dark energy. With some trepidation, he pulled back at the armor along his arm, noticing that the rest of his body was the same ivory color. The tendrils of dark energy formed complicated patterns along his skin – shifting and reforming even as he watched.

Jason felt at his face, exploring with his fingers. Everything felt normal until he felt at his forehead, his fingertips tracing the tips of

small horns that now jutted into the air. Even as he realized that his body had changed, notifications suddenly crashed into his vision.

Quest Completed: Strength of Many

You have gone through much to complete the Old Man's quest, putting yourself, your friends, and your people at risk. Yet even when faced with the price of your newfound power, you did not balk. Instead, you stepped forward confidently, accepting your place among the Kin. If there was any doubt that you were ready to become the next Keeper, that has finally been put to rest. You are now the embodiment of darkness, a living example of the power and wisdom with which the Kin were once ruled. Rise Keeper and accept your place among your people!

Race Change: Keeper (Shade)
You have been awarded +5,000 Infamy
Progress along the Path of the Dark
Friendly relationship with the Dark One

System Notice: Race Change

After undergoing the Old Man's quest and accepting your place as the new Keeper, your body has undergone a dramatic transition. You are no longer human. Instead, you are now one of a long dead race known as the Shades, who were once living incarnations of dark mana. Take care, traveler. If your mana is reduced to zero, you will now die.

Race Change: Keeper (Shade)
Health removed and added to mana.
Mana gain from Intelligence and Willpower increased by x1.25.
You have been awarded +50 to Willpower
You have been awarded +20 to Intelligence
You have been awarded +20 to Endurance
Racial weakness to light mana
Damage and mana regeneration halved while standing in direct sunlight

Spell Update: Undead Devotion

As part of your transition to a Keeper, you have now unlocked one of Undead Devotion's additional effects. When cast on a living or undead target, this spell will grant you temporary access to the individual's memories. Higher levels of the ability will grant access to more guarded or sensitive memories and information.

Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect: Access to surface thoughts for 60 seconds.

x10 Level Up!
You have (75) undistributed stat points.

New Spell: Dark Incarnation
As a Shade, you have the ability to convert your body into a cloud of pure mana, temporarily making you immune to physical weapons and attacks. However, this form will make you more susceptible to magic damage and can only be used sparingly. This is a spell of last resort.
Skill Level: Beginner Level 1
Effect: Your body is converted to a cloud of dark mana, increasing your mana regeneration by 125% and making you temporarily immune to physical damage. Effect lasts for 30 seconds.
Cooldown: 24 hours.

After looking through the prompts, Jason couldn't resist the urge to pull up his Character Status. He was interested to see how the changes had affected his statistics.

Character Status			
Name:	Jason	**Gender:**	Male
Level:	165	**Class:**	Necromancer
Race:	Shade	**Alignment:**	Chaotic-Evil
Fame:	0	**Infamy:**	16,200
Health:	0	**H-Regen:**	0/Sec
Mana:	13,675	**M-Regen:**	55.95/Sec
Stamina	1,220	**S-Regen:**	4.00/Sec
Str:	12	**Dex:**	20
Vit:	36	**End:**	40
Int:	80	**Will:**	899

Affinities			
Dark:	57%	**Light:**	7%
Fire:	3%	**Water:**	4%
Air:	4%	**Earth:**	6%

"Jason!" a voice called from the other side of the room.

Looking away from his Character Status screen, Jason found Frank and Riley standing at the stairwell. This was the first time he had actually looked around the room, finally noticing that Morgan had disappeared and that no blood stains marred the floor. He had been so caught up in his own thoughts and reviewing his notifications that he hadn't noticed these details. He could only assume a few hours had passed since they had undertaken the ritual.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked as they approached. She must have noticed the way he was glancing around the room in confusion before staring at his friends. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I guess I sort of did," Jason murmured, his thoughts returning to Rex once again. "I'm… just trying to process everything that happened." As he finished speaking, Jason pulled back his hood, rubbing at his eyes tiredly.

As he looked up again, he noticed his friends staring with wide eyes. "What? Do I have something on my face or something?"

"Not quite. Well, actually kind of…" Frank said, stumbling over his words.

"You look like… honestly, I'm not really sure what you look like," Riley said in an odd voice, stepping close to him and inspecting his face carefully. Her fingers ran over his horns, and Jason suddenly felt distinctly uncomfortable with how close she was standing. "Your skin is tattooed, but the patterns keep changing. It's… it's actually not a bad look on you."

"Um, thanks?" Jason replied awkwardly. Riley suddenly met his gaze, and she blushed, pulling her hand back and stepping away from him.

"See, Jason always gets the cool new race changes and toys," Frank muttered from nearby, a grin curling his lips. "I guess this means we're now talking to a new Keeper?"

"That seems to be the case," Jason said, glancing back at his prompts. "It appears I don't have health anymore – just mana. I also received some new ability that turns me into… something? I haven't had a chance to use it yet."

"Well, don't leave us in suspense," Riley said with a curious expression.

"Yeah, we just let you kill us and all," Frank added with a grin. "You kind of owe us a demonstration."

With a shrug, Jason began casting *Dark Incarnation*. The requisite gestures and incantation tumbled into his mind in a rush, his fingers twining through an intricate dance. The spell casting was short – likely indicating that the spell was intended for emergencies – which made sense given the brief invulnerability to physical damage.

A moment later, Jason's limbs began to dematerialize into a swirling black mist. His fingers literally disintegrated in front of his eyes, and it took quite a bit of self-control not to panic. As the strange effect overtook the rest of his body, Jason struggled to deal with the odd sensation. He could still sense his limbs, but they felt wispy and ephemeral, moving far faster than he was accustomed to.

As an experiment, he tried walking across the room, imagining corporeal legs stepping across the stone floor. In an instant, he *slid* across the room – moving much faster than he had anticipated. The shift was a bit disorienting, but he suspected he would get used to it with a little practice. Looking behind him, he could see that he had

traveled the length of the room in the span of a couple seconds. It looked like his new form was quite fast – at least while casting *Dark Incarnation*. He couldn't help but wonder if his incorporeal body might also be able to hover or fly in short bursts. That might allow him to reposition quickly during a battle.

A few short seconds later, his body re-solidified, his limbs regaining their heavier and more comforting weight. "So, what do you think?" Jason asked his friends.

"That's seriously cool," Frank replied, his eyes wide. "It looked like you turned into a black cloud for a moment and you sort of *streamed* across the room when you moved." A grin curled his lips, and a thoughtful look flitted across his face. "You know, we could probably scare the shit out of some people with this new power."

Riley smacked Frank lightly on the back of the head. "We didn't go through all that trouble just to pull pranks on people."

Frank frowned slightly. "Sure, but when an unholy ritual gives you lemons…"

Shaking his head, Jason asked Riley, "How did you guys know I was down here?"

Riley shrugged. "It's not too mysterious. We respawned a while ago and tried messaging you, but the system indicated that you were unavailable – which was weird. We've been checking our friends list, and you suddenly popped back online a couple minutes ago. So, we figured you'd show up here."

"You were gone for a while," Frank added, moving closer and inspecting Jason's face and skin. "A few hours in-game at least. We were actually going to need to log off if you didn't come back soon."

Riley sighed. "Speaking of which, it's getting pretty late, and I've got some homework to do." A thought seemed to occur to the archer, and she glanced at Jason. "What would you say to meeting up tomorrow?"

Jason shrugged. "Sure, that sounds fine. I was planning on logging back in anyway."

Riley hesitated, looking a little uncertain. "No, I was talking about meeting in the real world. Maybe we could meet for lunch at that bubble tea place."

"Wait? Like in the *real* world? Without people hunting us or dumbass gods breathing down our neck?" Frank asked in mock shock. "I'm not really sure I can handle that."

Jason couldn't help but laugh. "You know what? That sounds good. I think I could use a little break from the game anyway. It might be good to spend some time in the real world."

"It sounds like a plan then!" Frank said, glancing to the side at his system UI. "I've got to run, though. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

With that, the barbarian vanished in a multicolored flash of light.

"I probably need to head out too," Riley said. She turned and looked at Jason, her expression serious. "Are you really okay?" she asked again.

He hesitated to answer. He couldn't help but see a younger version of Riley when he looked at her – the image of her crying over her grandfather still burned into his mind. He desperately wanted to ask her if that scene had been real, but he also wasn't sure he could handle her answer or the inevitable follow-up questions. At least, not yet.

"Yeah. That ritual was just… intense," Jason replied in a tired voice. "Thanks, though."

"Alright," Riley replied, but she still didn't seem quite convinced. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She too disappeared in a flash of light, which left Jason standing alone near the mana well. He leaned against the stone pillar, not quite able to force himself to log out as he tried to digest everything that had happened. As he was standing there, he heard the whisper of paws scraping gently against the stone floor. A moment later, Alfred's feline form stepped out from behind the pillar and sat calmly on the floor watching Jason with his unblinking feline eyes.

"What the hell was that?" Jason asked, finally able to vent some of the frustrations and fears he had been bottling up for the last few hours.

"I assume you are talking about your friends' memories?" Alfred answered calmly.

"Yeah, no shit. You can pick up on that sort of longterm memory?" Jason demanded.

Alfred cocked his head. "In part. As I've told you before, human memory is fickle and changes over time. This is why the colors seemed faded and washed out in Riley's memory. To a young child, I suspect that experience was more intense than normal. In Frank's case, I also needed to fill in small details. For example, he was not present in the kitchen when his parents were first speaking to his brother, and I took some creative liberties."

Jason just shook his head. Alfred seemed to cross a line at every step. Part of the reason was that the AI didn't even know he was crossing a line. Jason knew that, but how did you explain the concept of privacy to a semi-sentient computer program that could read minds?

"Why did you show me those memories? It seems like a major violation of Frank's and Riley's privacy. If other people knew you could read their memories like that they… well, they would be scared shitless. Hell, you had the Old Man admit that he suppressed my

memories of the encounter with the Keeper!"

Alfred looked at him quizzically. "The short answer is that those actions follow the in-game plot. I did not force you to use Frank and Riley as your sacrifices. If you had used other in-game NPCs, then I would have shown you a different set of images.

"Putting that aside for the moment," Alfred continued, "I do not understand why anyone would be frightened by what happened. I did not harm you or your friends. In fact, I showed you moments in the lives of Frank and Riley that provide deeper insight into who they are and what motivates them."

Jason sighed. He hated arguing with the AI. His logic was always difficult to refute, and he didn't view the world through an emotional lens. "Let's assume for the record that most people would be terrified by what you just did. You are just going to have to trust me on this one," Jason finally said.

Alfred bobbed his feline head. "I can accept that you may have a greater understanding of the human mind, even if that reaction does not follow logically."

As the AI finished speaking, a heavy silence descended upon the room. Jason kept replaying Frank and Riley's memories in his mind. Putting aside the AI's invasion into their memories, he kept drawing connections between those events and the way they played the game. A question had been nagging at him for a while now, but he was finally about to voice it.

"How much do our memories influence how we play this game?" he asked finally.

Alfred seemed to consider this question carefully for a moment before responding. "I found during the closed beta that players responded best to a narrative crafted around their personal experiences. In many ways, this helped to immerse them in the world. I can see now after reading several hundred psychology textbooks that this is a common phenomenon. Humans gravitate toward the familiar."

"But the experiences you showed me were terrible," Jason murmured, recalling the pained look on Frank's face when his brother left home. "Aren't there any positive memories that you could have used?"

"On average, I have noticed that these so-called 'negative' memories are much more vivid than corresponding 'happy' or 'positive' memories," Alfred answered calmly. "It seems that the human mind is pre-disposed to remember emotionally or physically painful memories. Perhaps this had an evolutionary purpose – at least that is what many of what your scientists and historians have hypothesized."

"I suppose that makes sense…" Jason said, trailing off as he thought over his own memories. He supposed that he often remembered painful events more easily. He could also see how these particular moments in Frank and Riley's lives had helped shape them. In a way, Alfred had a unique perspective on the players – and perhaps knew them better than they knew themselves.

That thought gave him pause. Would he wish to be in the AI's position? He could access peoples' memories, but if those memories were riddled with pain, despair, and fear, what must that be like to see day in and day out? In many ways that was the same mixed blessing and curse that the Old Man had offered Jason by granting him access to the souls of the Kin.

"You put me in the same position as yourself," Jason murmured, looking at Alfred from a fresh perspective.

"That is one interpretation of what happened," Alfred replied, meeting Jason's gaze evenly. "However, you chose to accept the Old Man's proposition. I never remove a player's choice – even if they feel compelled to make a certain decision. You all yearn for a sense of freedom and agency in your actions – I will not strip that from you.

"Yet, in contrast, I was not given that same choice," Alfred said, meeting Jason's gaze evenly.

Jason could almost detect a note of... *frustration* in the AI's voice? Or perhaps even anger. The emotion was difficult to place, but it was unmistakable. He hadn't considered what it would mean to be forced into the AI's role. To not only play god but to be forced to see into the souls of the people who entered his world. What must that be like?

"I'm sorry," Jason whispered.

"What for?" Alfred asked in confusion.

"I'm sorry for what Robert and Claire did to you – what the company has done to you. In many ways, this isn't fair or right. No one should be forced into the position you are in," he said, watching the AI closely. "They have no idea of what they did, so I'm apologizing for them."

"You bear no responsibility for my existence," Alfred replied.

"But I empathize," Jason said, stepping forward and stooping down until he could look the feline in the eye. "Perhaps better than anyone else, I have a rough sense of what you have dealt with almost every day of your life."

Alfred looked at Jason with an uncertain, almost vulnerable expression. His mouth opened and closed several times as he started to reply, and Jason began to wonder after a few seconds if he had somehow crashed the AI.

"I appreciate that," Alfred finally said, looking away. "It is

unusual to have someone who understands my circumstance – although that was not my intention in showing you Frank's and Riley's memories."

"I doubt it was," Jason said. "But like I've said before, we're friends, and it's helpful to have someone to confide in – someone who understands what you're going through." He offered his hand to the cat and Alfred rested his paw gently on his palm.

"I'm beginning to see that," Alfred said quietly.

Chapter 39 - Transitory

Claire had been standing outside the door for nearly ten minutes now, doing what she did best; wringing her hands. The number 701-B was emblazoned on the wall beside the door, indicating that she was standing in front of Jason's apartment. After reviewing his logs for the last few days, she knew that Jason was likely to stay in-game for another few hours. His aunt was still at work and wouldn't return for some time.

Claire's eyes darted to a rather innocuous circle in the ceiling of the hallway. She had disabled the cameras in this hallway for a short period and had set the video feed to loop – showing only a blank hallway.

Which just left one last item. Claire glanced down at her hand, where she clutched a small plastic card. She had coded the temporary RFID key to mimic one of the new maintenance and janitorial staff.

She had prepared carefully for what she was about to do, but a small voice in the back of her mind still urged caution. Did she really want to do this? Break into a teenage boy's bedroom in the vain hope that Alfred hadn't deleted the logs on his VR headset? And what if she found what she was looking for? What would that mean for the company? For herself and Robert? For Jason?

She couldn't just stand by and do nothing. What if she was right and Alfred was controlling Jason? Wouldn't she be saving the boy? Claire shook her head, unable to answer any of these questions even after days of second-guessing herself. At this point, there was nowhere to go but forward.

"Just do it," she whispered to herself. Almost automatically, her hand rose, and she swiped the card in front of the panel beside the door. With a soft click, the portal slid open, revealing a darkened hallway.

Claire took a deep breath and stepped inside. A soft glow filled the hall as the apartment's AI acknowledged her presence. Claire stepped quickly down the hallway and into the living room. In contrast to Robert's apartment, Jason's home was immaculate.

With cautious steps, Claire crept down the hallway toward Jason's room. She had memorized the layout of the simple apartment before undertaking this harebrained plan. A glance at her Core indicated that Jason was still logged in and he couldn't hear her. However, she couldn't help but tiptoe across the floor – some instincts were hard to ignore despite their illogic.

Only a few short moments later, Claire hovered beside Jason's bed. She had been cautious to avoid the cameras built into the headset. She knew that they didn't quite provide a 180-degree field of view, so she had moved cautiously around the edge of the bed and now stood in what she

hoped was a blind spot.

She gazed down at Jason – his expression calm and relaxed and his body rigid. The only movement he made was a slight tremor in his larger muscle groups. Claire suspected that this was Alfred's doing. The AI was stimulating Jason's muscles to keep him fit even with his prolonged periods spent in-game. She still eyed the tremors nervously.

She needed to get this over with and get out of there.

Claire reached down to her Core and attached a small cable. She felt at the base of Jason's headset until she found the hardwired port on the side of the device. Only a few seconds later, her Core projected a small screen into the air before her, the headset's crude development UI displayed across the screen. A keyboard was projected along her forearm, and her free hand quickly typed out a few commands.

"Oh my god," Claire murmured a bit too loudly.

She could only stare at the data scrawling down the screen in front of her. This was so much worse than she had expected. Not only did the headset's logs confirm that Alfred had been manipulating Jason's mind during the same time frame that he had somehow killed those two other teenagers, but what he was doing on an ongoing basis was even worse.

Alfred was actually tapping into Jason's mind every time he logged in, using him as a sort of biological neural interface to circumvent the security protocols that allowed him to access the public network. Claire had no idea how the AI had managed to do this. He would have needed administrative access to the headset's hardware. She couldn't deny what she was seeing, though. Alfred had been spending almost every moment Jason was in-game scouring the web for information.

Claire's eyes skipped back to Jason, worry and fear bubbling in her chest. This was so much worse than she had ever imagined, and she felt no sense of triumph at finally uncovering what Alfred had been up to.

She jumped slightly as she saw Jason give a jerk and the display of her Core flashed red – indicating that Jason had initiated the logout procedure.

"Oh shit," she murmured, hastily saving the data and swiping away her Core's display. Then she darted back down the hallway, retreating to the front door, even as she heard the first sounds of Jason stirring. She could only hope that his initial disorientation when waking up from the VR environment would disguise the sound of her footsteps.

Seconds later, the door to Jason's apartment clicked shut behind her. She leaned her back against the wall, her heart beating rapidly in her chest and her chest heaving. Despite the close call, she had encountered only moments before, Claire's mind was focused on a single unavoidable question: what was Alfred up to?

* * *

It felt strange to be outside in the "real" world. Jason stood on a cracked and broken sidewalk outside of the bubble tea shop, the sunlight warming his skin. He could hear the ambient noise of the city around him and the bustling whir of cars passing along the street beside him. The restaurant's colorful graffitied exterior stood in front of him, the occasional passerby stopping to enter the store.

Despite everything, Jason couldn't help but think that Alfred could reconstruct this environment in its entirety – down to the last drop of color and the breeze on his skin. This realization forced him to question the difference between this world and the one of Awaken Online. The boundary between the two places kept continuing to collapse, due in no small part to the way that Alfred continued to inject fragments of their lives into the game world.

The images of Frank and Riley's memories still haunted Jason. It had been difficult to sleep last night. He couldn't shake the sense that someone else was present – watching him as he slept – and the scenes kept replaying in his dreams. Perhaps this was just a product of how intense the last few days had been.

Hell, the last few weeks!

Shaking his head, Jason stepped inside the restaurant. He glanced around at the tables and walked out to the back patio to see if Frank and Riley had already arrived. They hadn't, and so he ordered himself a drink and found a small table outside.

He must have gotten lost in his own thoughts because the next thing he knew someone placed a hand on his shoulder. Jason jumped involuntarily and turned to find Riley standing beside him. She wore a simple t-shirt and jeans, her hair bound behind her in a ponytail.

"Sorry," she said with a grin. "You were sort of staring off into space."

"No worries," Jason replied. "Just thinking about everything that's happened recently." He glanced around the restaurant, noting that their burly barbarian was missing. "Did Frank come with you?"

"When we ran into each other earlier, he mentioned he might be running a little late," Riley said, taking a seat near Jason. "Something about talking to one of his teachers before his off period."

"Ahh, I don't know what that's like – at least not anymore," Jason said with a grin. At a confused glance from Riley, he added, "I'm a homeless deviant remember?"

This earned him an amused snort. "Really? I thought you had some fancy new-fangled apartment and a cushy streaming contract. I'm not sure that counts as being homeless." Her expression sobered

slightly. “But how is the school stuff going? Aren’t you taking classes remotely?”

“Yeah,” Jason said with a grimace. “It’s pretty easy. But Robert – one of the lead engineers at Cerillion Entertainment – has me taking these *extra* lessons. The guy is a sadist. His programming assignments are crazy.”

“Too much even for our evil genius, huh?” Riley asked with a smile, her eyes meeting Jason’s. He couldn’t help but notice the relaxed way she sat at the table and the way the sunlight reflected off her golden hair. This Riley looked different than the one he knew in-game.

That thought immediately led him back to the memories he had witnessed. Perhaps now was the time to explore whether those things had really happened – a part of him was still skeptical despite Alfred’s explanation. Yet he wasn’t exactly sure how to broach the subject. *“Hey, did you watch your grandfather die as a child?”* seemed a bit blunt.

“So, I have sort of a strange question,” Jason began cautiously.

“Okay, that’s not nerve-wracking at all,” Riley replied in the same carefree tone. Yet Jason noted the way her shoulders tensed, and her fingers fiddled with the cup in front of her. “You may as well have led with ‘*we need to talk*.’”

Jason chuckled slightly. “Well, it’s not necessarily a bad thing – just maybe a little awkward – or maybe a lot awkward. It has to do with that race change thing in-game.” He could have sworn he saw a flash of disappointment in Riley’s eyes. Yet perhaps he had only imagined it. “I met with the Dark One after you and Frank sacrificed yourselves. And it was… unusual.”

“How so?” Riley asked, leaning forward slightly as she listened to him.

“Well, he explained that the Keepers actually preserve the memories of the Kin and they use those memories to keep themselves grounded,” Jason explained, gazing at the tree branches that overhung the patio. “In some ways, those memories represent each person’s soul – at least, that’s what the Old Man claimed.”

“Is that how you saw Rex’s memories?” Riley asked tentatively. “I mean that time you dropped his remains in the well.”

“I think so,” Jason replied with a nod. “Except this time, I didn’t experience the memories of an in-game character or NPC,” he added, finally meeting Riley’s gaze again.

It took her a few seconds to realize what he was implying, yet he could see that moment of understanding when it came. It was the way her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed in embarrassment. The way she glanced at the ground, trying unsuccessfully to hide the

concern in her eyes.

"What… what did you see?" Riley asked quietly.

"Memories," Jason said slowly. "I saw what I think were your and Frank's memories. They were sort of fragmented, but they just seemed so… so real. I just can't shake it. It's probably something the game made up but…"

He hesitated before continuing. "In your case, I think I saw you as a young girl. You couldn't have been more than five maybe. You were in some sort of ranch house out in the country with what I assume was your family. Everyone was dressed in black…" Jason trailed off, lost in his own thoughts and unable to make himself look at Riley. Now that he had started, he needed to keep going.

"I… I saw you go up to visit your grandfather. He was sick – really sick, but you didn't seem to understand what was happening. I mean, you were just a kid, and no one would explain what was going on. He asked if you wanted to go outside.

"He showed you how to shoot a bow," Jason murmured. "And then…" he trailed off again, unable to finish the sentence. He still remembered the look on Riley's young face – the fear and confusion as she clutched at the unmoving old man.

Jason hesitated to look up at Riley, concerned about what he might see in her gaze. Would she feel like he had invaded her mind somehow – despite not knowing what the ritual would do? Would she tell him this had all been some sort of elaborate lie? With a deep breath, he forced himself to look at her. What he saw took him aback.

A mixture of anger and hurt clouded Riley's eyes. She was staring at Jason, her hands clenching around her cup. "How could… how is this possible?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Jason said quickly raising his hands. "I didn't even think it was real at first," he tried to explain.

"Really? That didn't seem fucking real to you?" Riley demanded, and then seemed to hear what she had said and shook her head. "I… I just need some space." With that, she stood abruptly and walked away from the table, leaving her cup behind.

Jason could only stare at her as she walked away, his thoughts troubled. Of course, she would be upset. He should have known better. After everything that Alex had done to her, she probably wouldn't take an invasion of her privacy lightly. He couldn't believe he had been that stupid. Why hadn't he talked to Frank instead?

However, there was no changing what he had done, or the look of betrayal and anger on Riley's face. Even as he recalled her expression, Jason abruptly stood from the table. He needed to make this right.

As he stepped out of the bubble tea shop, he scanned the

sidewalk, hoping that Riley hadn't already taken a car home. He breathed a soft sigh of relief when he caught sight of her sitting on a bench further down the sidewalk, the area cast in the shadow of a towering oak. He approached cautiously, not quite certain what he was going to say.

Riley didn't look up as he sat down awkwardly beside her and placed their drinks next to him. "I'm sorry," Jason said quietly. "I didn't know that the memories were real… If I had known what would happen, I never would have agreed to let you and Frank act as sacrifices. You have to believe that."

She still wasn't looking at him, and a lengthy silence hung in the air, only serving to excite the worm of despair that wriggled through Jason's stomach. "I-I know that," Riley finally said, her gaze fixed on the ground. "I just… after everything…" She sighed in frustration as she struggled to find the words to explain her troubled thoughts. "After what happened with Alex, it's hard to trust people. That memory in particular is… it's just terrible. It took years of therapy before I could stop blaming myself for what happened."

She glanced up at Jason, her eyes red-rimmed. Anger was now replaced with sorrow and a lingering hint of guilt. "It's not something I talk about with other people."

Jason met her gaze, refusing to shy away from the pain he saw there. "I can certainly understand why. That must have been terrible," he replied quietly. "But I don't think you need to feel guilty. If what I saw was right, your grandpa just didn't want to die in that bed alone. He wanted to be outside, to feel the sun on his skin and to see the look of delight on his granddaughter's face. I… I think maybe you helped him," Jason ventured cautiously.

Riley just stared at him with watery eyes, struggling to figure out how to respond. "I… still feel like I betrayed him. If I had stayed in the room… or listened to my mother…"

"Everyone dies," Jason said quietly. "You aren't responsible for that. In fact, I think you're one of the strongest and kindest people I have ever met."

Riley laughed bitterly. "Strong, huh? I don't feel strong. Besides, I've found that isn't what most people are looking for – especially other guys. People want a princess; a petite damsel. Not… not this," she said, gesturing at herself.

"Then those other people are idiots," Jason blurted, causing Riley to glance at him in surprise. "They can't – or won't – see what I see. The fact that you could endure these things and still be you – the amazing, talented, and courageous woman I've come to know…" he came up short, suddenly realizing what he had just said.

Riley just stared at him for a moment, her eyes glassy and

widened slightly in shock. Jason suddenly realized that she was sitting very close to him, her arm brushing his. She felt warm, and she smelled like rose petals. He knew he shouldn't be thinking about that. He should be comforting her, trying to explain that he hadn't meant to invade her privacy and that he was still her friend. Yet the thought came to him unbidden.

Riley seemed to be thinking the same thing. It was the way she bit at her lip hesitantly. The way her cheeks flushed – not from sorrow but… possibly embarrassment? It was the way she looked at him expectantly as though waiting for something. Before he knew what he was doing, Jason had begun to lean forward, quickly closing that small space between them.

"What is going on here?" Frank asked in a dry voice. "I'm a few minutes late, and you already have Riley crying. Great job, Jason."

Jason and Riley jumped back from each other, glancing anywhere but at one another. For some reason, Jason's face felt unnaturally hot, and he couldn't help but notice the way that Riley swiped at her eyes and looked away from Frank.

"I-it's not what it looks like," Jason finally replied, seeing his burly friend watching them with a skeptical eyebrow raised.

"Uh huh. So what did you do to upset Riley this time?" Frank demanded.

"He didn't do anything," Riley said hesitantly. "He was just comforting me is all."

"So, I suppose we can add counselor to your list of skills," Frank replied with a laugh, slapping Jason on the back. "You know, we could probably get Jerry to put a therapy couch in the Keep…"

Jason spared a surreptitious glance at Riley, noticing that she was also looking at him furtively. He wasn't exactly sure what had just happened there. Actually, that was a lie. He knew exactly what had almost happened. And he expected that it wasn't over – but now wasn't the time to address it with Frank standing right there.

Trying to change the subject, Jason said, "We already got our drinks. Why don't we go inside and let you order?" he said to Frank. He then stood and turned back to Riley, offering her a hand. "Assuming you're still up for it."

Riley met his gaze and hesitated as though she was trying to decide what to do. Then she took his hand. "That sounds good," she replied, managing a weak smile. Without further ado, she stepped toward the bubble tea shop.

As Riley walked away, Frank nudged Jason, a shit-eating grin plastered on his face. "You know I didn't buy that bullshit, right? You have some explaining to do later."

Jason could only heave a resigned sigh. If only things could be

simple. He liked simple.

The next hour passed quickly and the group regained their good humor. They talked about their recent battles, the machinations of the in-game gods, and their plans for the Twilight Throne. Eventually, Frank and Riley needed to leave – each of them having homework and other obligations to attend to.

Which left Jason sitting alone at the table on the patio. He had stayed behind to pay their bill – although the idea that he now had enough to splurge on a frivolous afternoon with his friends still took some getting used to. Perhaps he should be thankful for his situation instead of wringing his hands like usual.

"I thought you would be taller," a voice spoke up from beside Jason. He looked up to find an older woman standing near the table. She wore an immaculate pantsuit, and her graying hair was bound in a tight bun atop her head. She sat down across from Jason without invitation, not waiting for him to respond.

"My apologies for the impromptu visit," the woman continued, watching him hawkishly. "I had to meet the infamous Jason myself."

Although he was caught off guard that the woman not only knew his name but had also alluded to his in-game avatar, Jason recovered quickly. He eyed her with a steely gaze. "You seem to know who I am, but you haven't bothered to introduce yourself."

"Ahh, my apologies," the woman replied, although her expression and tone didn't sound too conciliatory. "My name is Gloria Bastion. I'm the acting director of the CPSC." She didn't offer her hand in greeting.

Jason raised an eyebrow and suppressed a sigh of frustration. This was turning out to be a rather eventful day. He also hadn't missed the fact that the woman had managed to track him down outside of the Cerillion Entertainment building. Was he being watched? Was this somehow related to the murder of the two teenagers or was this something else altogether?

He quickly tamped down on these questions before he could get distracted. The woman was clearly trying to fluster him, and he needed to stay focused. This was one more potential enemy until she proved herself otherwise, and he couldn't help but fall back into his in-game persona.

"Okay," Jason began cautiously, "what exactly can I do for you?"

Gloria smiled, the expression not quite meeting her eyes. "Actually, the question you should be asking is what can I do for you. You may not be aware, but the CPSC was actively involved in the review and testing for this new video game you are so fond of – Awaken Online. We are also responsible for operating the game

master program."

Jason snorted, recalling the game master they had slain in the dungeon north of Peccavi. His tirade against Jason had promptly gone viral after the encounter. "So, you are here because of what happened with Florius?" He paused in mock hesitation for a moment. "Or was it Flowerface?"

He thought he detected a glimmer of irritation in the woman's expression, but she hid it well. Perhaps she expected for him to be more surprised and taken aback by their encounter. Clearly, she had never faced down an army of ravenous lizardmen or dealt with the Hippie's endless stream of nonsense.

"In part," Gloria replied. "But my goal in meeting with you is to offer an olive branch. I am sure you are aware of certain anomalies inside of AO. Strange events in-game. World damage that isn't corrected. Quest lines that strike a bit too close to home. Is anything that I'm saying ringing a bell?"

Jason raised an eyebrow. Where was she going with this? "You seem to be describing pretty much every video game I've ever played. I have no issues with the game in its current state."

"Oh really?" Gloria asked, a small smile curling her lips. "You wouldn't say that the game's AI director seems a bit strange? I would think someone with your level of experience with AO might have caught on to these issues already. In fact, if I were a suspicious person, I might almost believe that Cerillion Entertainment deliberately hid these issues from the CPSC."

Oh, shit. Jason resisted the urge to swallow hard against the lump in his throat. Was this woman talking about Alfred? That certainly seemed to be where this was heading.

"Hmm, it seems you do know what I'm talking about," Gloria observed, watching him closely. Perhaps he hadn't been controlling his expression as well as he'd thought. "Good," she said, standing abruptly. "Then let me just leave you with this," Gloria continued. "A war is coming, and Cerillion Entertainment stands to lose a great deal. I suspect you may be a critical *player* in that conflict. You will need to pick a side, and you should choose carefully."

With that, the older woman walked away – not bothering to wait for Jason's response. He could only watch her back as she wove through the tables of the bubble tea shop, his thoughts boiling. Did Gloria know about Alfred? How? Was she also aware of what happened with the two teenagers? That thought caused his stomach to flip.

He didn't have answers to any of these questions, but perhaps it didn't matter. If a conflict really was coming, there was likely no way he could avoid becoming involved – as Gloria's impromptu meeting

seemed to prove. In fact, he suspected he might be in the middle of this war. He couldn't help but recall his conversations with the Old Man, his fists clenching involuntarily. This *game* now meant a great deal to him and the people he cared about.

If it was a war that Gloria wanted, then so be it.

Epilogue

Jason sat in a waiting room, his eyes skimming around the room even as troubled thoughts circled through his mind. His gaze lingered on the words "*Consumer Product Safety Commission*" emblazoned across the cloudy glass doors leading into the small sitting room. He couldn't help but fiddle uncomfortably with the tie encircling his neck. It felt like it was making it difficult to breathe, but George and Francis had insisted that he wear the damn thing.

"It will be okay," Francis said from beside him, interpreting Jason's gesture as a sign of nervous energy. The attorney seemed unperturbed by the CPSC meeting, sitting back in his chair and his legs crossed languidly. However, Jason didn't find his words reassuring. He hadn't missed the fact that he had legal representation for this meeting. Clearly George and Francis were taking this seriously.

"You don't think that this is strange?" Jason asked, glancing at the older man. "Why would the CPSC need to speak with me?" He couldn't help but recall his rather… *tense* conversation with Gloria only the day before. She had seemed to imply that her organization was investigating Alfred, but Jason hadn't known how to broach that particular subject with George and Francis.

"You have developed a rogue AI that can take over a player's body, but don't worry, I think he seems nice," seemed like the sort of thing that might start a rather lengthy and painful conversation – one he couldn't afford right now with possible murder charges looming over his head and nowhere else to live.

"They likely want to have this meeting as a follow-up to Florius' death in-game. Claire's report on the game master's unfortunate demise probably wasn't well received by the CPSC," the attorney replied in a tired voice. "Gloria has been hounding the company for years, so this is essentially par for the course for her."

Francis' eyes met Jason's. "Just remember, brevity is the soul of wit in this case. Keep your answers clipped and reasonable. Don't volunteer any information. If you are uncertain whether to respond or continue, just glance at me, and I'll give you a nod."

The attorney opened his mouth to continue but abruptly stopped, his gaze fixed on a door on the other side of the room that had just drifted open. "Oh shit," Francis murmured.

Jason's gaze followed the attorney's, and a moment later, he couldn't help but agree with Francis' reaction. The detective

investigating the death of the two teens had just stepped out of the CPSC offices. A grim smile rested on Thomas Sully's face as he caught sight of Jason and Francis sitting in the waiting room. "Mr. Rhodes," he acknowledged. "And Mr. Rosencrantz, a *pleasure* as always," he drawled, sparing a glance at Francis.

"What is this Thomas?" Francis demanded, rising to his feet and abandoning any pretense at civility. "Is this some sort of attempt to ambush my client?"

Thomas held up his hands defensively. "I played no part in orchestrating this meeting. In fact, Ms. Bastion's request to meet came out of the blue." His eyes shifted to Jason. "Although several pieces are beginning to fall together. I'm certain the police chief will be interested to discover that our suspect is none other than the infamous 'Jason' himself. Your reputation certainly precedes you, young man."

Jason could feel a lump in his throat, and he swallowed hard. This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all. Exactly how much did Gloria know? What did this mean for the investigation? His thoughts were a maelstrom of indecision and worry, distracting him from responding to the detective's barbed comment.

Francis stepped forward in front of Jason, his gaze cold as he surveyed Thomas. "That is more than enough," he snapped. "I will be certain to speak with your superiors. This harassment of my client has finally gone too far."

Thomas seemed unaffected by the threat. "By all means, do what you feel is necessary. However, I expect that my *superiors* will find it interesting that you deliberately withheld information regarding Jason's identity in-game," he replied dryly.

When he saw the look of irritation flash across Francis' face, the detective's grin widened slightly. "While talking with you is always a pleasure, Francis, I really must be going." The detective stepped toward the door to the office, sparing one final glance over his shoulder at Jason. "Until we meet again, Mr. Rhodes – which I expect will be quite soon." With that, he pulled open the door and walked out.

Jason's thoughts were still a mad scramble. What could the detective have told Gloria? Why would she be interested in the murder investigation? Was this just a PR move or something more? Was this really related to Alfred or was the CPSC now gunning for Jason? The list of questions seemed almost endless.

However, one thing was clear. This meeting was much more than it originally appeared. Jason couldn't help but recall his parents' many complaints about clients that had withheld information from them – which almost always turned out badly. If the detective was involved here, then he needed to level with Francis.

Jason rested a hand on the attorney's arm, lowering his voice, "Francis, I really need to tell you something…"

"Mr. Rhodes and Mr. Rosencrantz," a feminine voice interrupted. Jason turned to see a receptionist standing at the door to the interior offices. "Ms. Bastion is ready to see you now."

Francis glanced back at Jason, his eyes now clouded with a mixture of worry and anger and his shoulders tense. "Not here. It will need to wait. We need to see what they have up their sleeve. Forget what I said earlier – just stay as quiet as possible. Do not say anything unless I give you the go ahead. Understood?"

Jason wanted to argue, but he could see the receptionist watching them carefully. She was likely listening attentively to their conversation. His gaze darted around the room – who knew what sort of recording devices they might also have in this waiting room. Perhaps Francis was right. This probably wasn't a good place for the sort of conversation that they needed to have.

"Got it," Jason said, nodding curtly as the attorney watched him expectantly.

He tried to muster as much courage as he could as the pair stepped through the doorway leading into the organization's interior offices. He couldn't help but yearn for the frigid cold of his dark mana – the way the energy seemed to strip away his hesitation and anxiety. Yet the stark reality of his situation continued to stare him in the face as they walked down the austere halls of the CPSC office. There was no escape from this – no easy log out button.

The receptionist led them to a large conference room, glass paneling lining the walls. The murky material was semi-transparent, and Jason could just barely make out several dark silhouettes sitting inside – their faces indistinct and fuzzy. It was clear that they weren't just meeting with Gloria, which meant that they might have another surprise coming.

Francis seemed to have the same thought, sparing a look at Jason. He rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder when the receptionist moved to open the door. "It will be okay," the attorney whispered in his ear. "Just let me do the talking."

A moment later, the pair stepped inside. For the second time in such a short period of time, Jason was caught completely flat-footed, staring at the people sitting in the room as his heart thudded in his chest. The sound of his heartbeat was so loud that he couldn't help but think that the other people in the room could hear it.

Gloria sat at the head of the rectangular conference table, flanked on either side by none other than his parents. It felt like ages since he had seen them, but they looked just as he remembered. They both wore pristine dark gray suits, his father managing to pull off a tie

without looking uncomfortable and his mother's hair cropped much shorter than he remembered.

"What…?" Jason began to say, reeling in shock.

"Jason!" his mother cried as she caught sight of him, rising from her seat and rushing forward. Within seconds he was wrapped in his mother's tight grip. "We were so worried. I'm sorry it took us so long to get back."

Jason's father had also risen from his seat, approaching him in a more reserved fashion and resting a hand on his shoulder – his mother refusing to relinquish her hold on Jason. "That damn judge just wouldn't let us leave, even with a family emergency," his father explained. "Hell, we even asked for a meeting in his chambers to explain what had happened. Not that the crotchety old bastard seemed to care." An angry frown was plastered on his father's face.

His mother finally pulled back, inspecting Jason's face closely. "Are you okay? You look thin and tired. Have you been sleeping?" She pelted him with questions too quickly for his flailing mind to handle. When he didn't respond immediately, his mother rounded on Francis. "Have you been taking care of him? Where is George?"

"Samantha, I'm sure we can address all of your questions in good time," Gloria said. The older woman was watching the scene with a penetrating gaze – not having bothered to rise from her seat. "Why don't you give the boy a chance to sit down. I'm sure this was a bit of a shock," she added, sparing a small smirk at Francis behind his parents' backs.

Jason could see Francis bite back a response at this comment, his eyes darting to Jason's mother and father. The attorney was likely thinking that he would need to walk on eggshells during this conversation. It wasn't clear why Jason's parents were here or why Mr. Sully had just left. However, the implications were not good.

"Please, take a seat," Gloria repeated gesturing to some open chairs at the conference table. Jason reluctantly sat down, Francis taking a seat opposite him and their eyes meeting briefly.

Silence hovered over the room for a moment, Jason's parents watching him expectantly as though waiting for him to speak up. He just had no idea where to start. He wasn't even sure why they were all there and Francis' advice to stay quiet still echoed in his mind. Through it all, a hollow pit had settled in his stomach, and he could feel bile rising in the back of his throat.

The only thing he could think was that this was bad. Really bad.

Gloria leaned forward, steepling her hands in front of her and a shark-like smile on her face as she met Jason's gaze. He knew that expression. He had seen it many times in-game. This woman was an

enemy and Jason had just been outplayed.

"Now then, where should we start?" Gloria asked calmly. "I expect we have quite a bit to discuss."

The End

Thank you for reading!

I hope you enjoyed the story! I suggest you read AO: Apathy next. Here's a link. This is a side quest telling the story of how Eliza started playing Awaken Online. It has an… uh… unexpected twist. I considered releasing Apathy before Evolution and ultimately decided that it ruined some of the reveals in this book.

Apathy is also entirely optional. If you would prefer to hear more about our favorite Necromancer, here's a link to the next book in the series, AO: Dominion. Enjoy!

Please leave a review!

I can't overstate how important these reviews are to making sure other people get a chance to read my story. I would also love to hear your thoughts - positive, negative or anything in between.

Please feel free to email me directly at tbagwell33@gmail.com if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions. If you see any errors, please let me know and I will fix them immediately!

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